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THE ROLE OF WOMEN
IN THE
FOUNDING AND DEVELOPMENT
OF
FAIRBANKS, ALASKA
1903-1923

A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty

of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Phyllis Demuth Movius, B.A.

Fairbanks, Alaska
December 1996

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

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RECOMMENDED:

Advisory Committee Chair

Department Head

APPROVED:

Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Dean of the Graduate School

11-19-96

Date

Abstract

Women of varying backgrounds participated in the founding and development of Fairbanks. This thesis will present portraits of four women who are representative of these variances, arrived in Fairbanks prior to the opening of the Alaska Railroad and the arrival of big mining, and who left written records of their lives.

Separated from her husband when she came to Alaska from Dawson, Ellen Gibson struggled to gain elusive financial security. Jessie Bloom immigrated from Ireland as a new bride intent on establishing a home based on European Jewish tradition. Margaret Keenan thrived in an environment that allowed professional advancement. Mary Lee Davis accompanied her husband to Fairbanks and enjoyed social advantage and a successful writing career.

Women's experiences in early Fairbanks parallel those of women on the American western frontier in the 1800s. However, river transportation into the Interior and technological advances nationwide gave the twentieth-century Alaska pioneers an advantage.

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List of Abbreviations

AJAC	American Jewish Archives Collection
CFHR	City of Fairbanks Historical Records
CRC	Clara Rust Collection
FEWML	Frances E. Willard Memorial Library
MKHC	Margaret Keenan Harrais Collection
RJBP	Robert and Jessie Bloom Papers
SEGC	Sarah Ellen Gibson Collection

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Inspired by my own recreational wilderness experiences living in a cabin on the Goodpaster River in the Big Delta Region of Alaska's Interior, my research about how women lived in the early days of Fairbanks was initiated by simple curiosity. My winter experiences at a cabin heated by a wood stove and without indoor plumbing, running water, or refrigeration caused me to wonder how women a hundred years ago lived their everyday lives under similar circumstances. My first lesson learned was to take advantage of the short number of daylight hours in which to accomplish the chores of pumping water from the well and hauling it to the cabin by snow machine and replenishing the wood box from piles of logs cut, split, and stacked during the summer. The second lesson I understood was to finish the work quickly in order to take advantage of the remaining light for skiing or some other outdoor activity that furnished exercise and fresh air. Once this routine was established, I set out to learn ways to let the wood stove work for me in the kitchen. At first I only attempted to heat up already cooked food, but with instructions from my gentleman neighbor a quarter mile upriver, I actually learned how to cook, and simmering pots of chili and stew became favorite meals. During my first few winters at this wilderness retreat, reading and hand sewing were frequent indoor activities,

but the yellowish light emitted from propane or kerosene lamps made close work difficult. My engineer husband installed solar collection panels that keep twelve volt deep-cycle batteries charged, and all of the apparatus designed for use by modern recreational vehicles became available for our use. My desire, however, to cling to the traditional past did not allow the import of too many of these devices. I still do some cooking on the wood stove that also heats flat irons used to press quilt blocks under construction, but I appreciate the ability to plug in my lap-top computer. Illumination from electric halogen lamps provides better task lighting, but my need to keep in touch with the ways women worked in the past causes me to cling to my treadle sewing machine brought from North Carolina. Like the early Alaska pioneers, however, I have greatly benefited from twentieth-century technology.

Introduction to the ever-growing body of literature about women on America's western frontier deepened my interest in Alaska's pioneer women, and I began to apply the questions asked about our sisters in the west to women on the Last Frontier. What preconceptions did women have about Alaska's wilderness and its Native population? Were these ideas changed by life on the frontier? What social, economic, cultural and intellectual preparation did women have for the new experience in the north? Were adaptations made to their previously held ideals of woman's place in the home and society? Did women assume new roles as a result of their pioneering experience, and did these changes affect individual and national perceptions of woman's place? In what ways did women's impressions of and adaptations to life on an isolated frontier differ from men?

This study will explore women who settled in Fairbanks, the new town on the Chena River in the heart of Alaska's Interior, between 1903 and 1923 prior to the opening of the Alaska Railroad and the advent of big mining, in an attempt to answer some of

these questions. It will provide insight into their motivation, resourcefulness and accomplishments. The quality of women's daily lives is represented by biographical portraits of four women. Their stories were woven from the women's own recollections preserved in letters, memoirs, personal papers, club records and, to a limited degree, their oral histories and published writings. The women represented here came from a variety of backgrounds, education and experiences, but they all left personal documentation of their lives. As such, they and their families who preserved the records have shaped a view of history. Information about the lives of many other women who participated in the early development of Fairbanks is not as accessible—their memoirs may be inbedded in less definable oral histories or other individuals' stories and recollections. Their part in the broad examination of women's roles in history awaits discovery and analysis.

There are many individuals to whom I am indebted for their assistance with this project. I am grateful to all of the archive, library and historical society staff who responded to my requests. However, some stand out for their willingness to go beyond what is expected. Meta Bloom Buttnick's many letters provided otherwise illusive information that added depth to the chapters about her mother Jessie Bloom and their family friend, Mary Lee Davis. Considerable assistance with the biographical portrait of Mary Lee came from Jean N. Berry, Archives Assistant at the Margaret Clapp Library of Wellesley College and Nanci A. Young, Assistant Archivist at the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library of Princeton University, who put me in touch with Mary Lee's sister-in-law, Joyce Cadwell Lewis. Mrs. Lewis is especially appreciated for generously sharing information from family records. When Signe J. Kelker of the Ezra Lehman Memorial Library at Shippensburg University began his search for material related to Mary Lee's mother a steady stream of manuscript material and microfilm were forthcoming. Contact

with Kay Ackerman, Archivist and Assistant Professor of History at the C. Elizabeth Boyd Archival Center of Wilson College provided additional information about Mary Lee's mother, and Frank K. Lorenz, Curator of Special Collections at Hamilton College, was instrumental with assistance about Mary Lee's father.

Alfred Epstein of the Frances E. Willard Memorial Library of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in Evanston, Illinois, worked tirelessly to supply documents related to Margaret Keenan Harrais's work with the organization. Through his dedication, I was able to focus on this little known facet of her life. Noble County Ohio genealogist and historian Lois Blake wrote that the search for information about Margaret's ancestry "has been one of the ones I have most enjoyed doing in the twenty-five years of this sort of work." I am pleased that Mrs. Blake gained so much pleasure by helping with this project.

I am particularly grateful to the staff of the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and Candice Waugaman who for several years shared my interest in women in early Fairbanks and generously suggested sources and shared items from their personal historical collections.

For this same interest and assistance, I thank my academic committee members at the University of Alaska Fairbanks; doctors Mary Mangusso, Carol Gold and William Schneider. Not only did they act as able advisors, they genuinely shared my excitement with each new discovery during the research process. Additionally, I am indebted to Dr. Beverly Beeton of the University of Alaska Anchorage whose shared interest in the social history of Alaska women broadened the scope of this work and whose friendship helped me keep my mission in perspective. To her, and all of Alaska's women who have collectively participated to shape this last frontier, I dedicate this work.

Chapter One

A Light in the Wilderness

"Living in this wonderful land
never could be considered a hindrance to the good life.
With pioneering came material inconveniences,
but it is one's reaction to any difficulty
which may arise that matters—not the problem itself."[1]

Fairbanks was founded accidentally on the south bank of the Chena River seven miles upstream from its confluence with the Tanana River when a sand bar grounded trader E. T. Barnette's steamer in 1901. Destined for Tanacross, further up the Tanana and near the Canadian border, Barnette planned to establish a trading post at the half-way point of a proposed railroad between Valdez and Eagle.[2] Stranded, Barnette unloaded his cargo. The next year this enterprising young man met local prospector Felix Pedro, who shared news of a gold strike in the surrounding hills, and a new community was born.[3]

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[1]Agnes Thomas, Member's Recollections, Pioneer Women of Alaska, Clara Rust Collection (hereafter CRC), Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, No box number.

[2]Terrence Cole, *E. T. Barnette: The Strange Story of the Man Who Founded Fairbanks* (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Company, 1981), 18.

[3]For extensive study of the founding of Fairbanks see: Terrence Cole; James Wickersham, *Old Yukon: Tales—Trails—and Trials* (Washington, D. C.: Washington Law Book Co., 1938); Cecil Francis Robe, "The Penetration of an Alaskan Frontier: The Tanana Valley and Fairbanks" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1943).

Prior to finding gold in the Tanana Valley, prospectors were busy in the Fortymile, Circle City and Nome districts in Alaska and in Canada's Klondike. The federal government took notice of all this activity and supported Alaska's development by building trails, forts, constructing a telegraph system for the purpose of connecting the posts, and laying a cable to connect this system with the United States. A federal court was established at Eagle in 1900, and the United States Geological Survey charted the region. Fort Gibbon, on the Yukon River at the mouth of the Tanana, provided some semblance of law and order,[4] and the community of Chena, founded in 1901 where the Chena River flows into the Tanana, was a fur trading center.[5] The United States Army's search for overland routes into the Interior of Alaska gave prospectors more choices for entry than just rivers, which previously had been the only travel options. The military trail up the Copper River Valley, constructed between 1898 and 1901, had a branch into Fairbanks, and construction of a telegraph system by the Army soon produced other paths.[6]

Into Barnette's hastily constructed trading post came a rush of seasoned prospectors from played out gold fields in Canada and other Alaska locations. They rushed to the new gold fields still hopeful that "the sinking of 'one more hole' might compensate for years of back-breaking toil."[7] The following frequently told story illustrates the mind-set of these confirmed fortune hunters:

> At the gates of Heaven a "sourdough" applied for admittance. St. Peter denied his request and stated that there were already too many prospectors

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[4]Robe, 45.

[5]Ibid., 103.

[6]Ibid., 11.

[7]Ibid., 115.

within the sacred precincts. The applicant promised that if he were admitted he would rid the place of prospectors. Thereupon St. Peter permitted the "sourdough" to enter.

The newcomer at once sought out his former cronies and soon whispered into the ear of each the "news" of a rich strike in Hell. He mentioned "coarse gold," so many "cents to the pan," "shallow ground," and so forth.

The next morning bright and early each and every prospector slipped away through the pearly gates, purposely left ajar, and stampeded to Hell. Not long after their departure St. Peter intercepted the recent arrival as he, too, was stealing away to follow his fellows. When the astonished saint inquired the reason for his departure, the "sourdough" replied. "You know there might be something to that report after all."[8]

Miners so poor they had no provisions or capital with which to fund their mining operations streamed into the Tanana Valley only to meet discouragement when they learned that E. T. Barnette accepted only money or furs at his store—no credit was extended. As quickly as they arrived most seekers departed, leaving only thirty residents in the area. Barnette's enterprise was flagging. Some believed that to stimulate business, Barnette began a campaign of exaggerated claims about the amount of gold to entice prospectors. By January 1903 Abraham Spring, an attorney in Circle who later came to Fairbanks, calculated there were eight hundred people in Chena and Fairbanks, but no mining equipment. Nevertheless and during the coldest winter on record, people poured

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[8]Ibid.

out of depressed Dawson headed for the Tanana Valley. By April 1, 1903, the Fortymile Police Station had recorded 578 men, women and children who had passed through enroute to the Fairbanks area. Supplies were sparse and prices high, but the pioneers staked town site lots and got down to the business of building a community.[9]

Unlike the earlier stampeders who came for gold, this second wave of hopefuls was lured by the prospects of business enterprise. These seasoned pioneers had time and experience on their side, and instead of retreating south when the Klondike gold waned, they chose to make permanent homes in the north. Initially lured to Dawson with hopes of quick riches, they moved to Fairbanks content with the slower but more reliable route to the good life—business. When they arrived in February they were greeted by seven saloons on First Avenue and immediately set out to build several restaurants, a barber shop and newsstand, two clothing stores, a Japanese laundry, a drug store and a second hand store. Comingled with the businesses were lawyers, doctors and dentists.[10] In March the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches established themselves, and in April, E. T. Barnette deeded a parcel of his land at Cushman and Third for use as a court house and jail site. Thus, Judge James Wickersham moved the seat of justice from Eagle into Fairbanks.

Shortly after Wickersham's arrival Frank Cleary divided up the community into lots and blocks and charted avenues which paralleled the meandering course of the Chena. Streets, laid out at right angles to the river, were named for early settlers and government officials, and avenues were designated by number, beginning at the water front.[11] This

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[9]Ibid., 137-56.

[10]Ibid., 162.

[11]Ibid., 170-1.

geometric pattern is consistent with the development of other frontier towns and, according to historian Richard C. Wade, had deeper meaning. By the twentieth century America was shifting from an agricultural based economy to one with industrial roots. This rectangular pattern assigned to city streets gave the illusion of orderliness and represented urban rather than rural living.[12] For the residents of Fairbanks, familiarity with the structure they had previously known Outside may have added emotional comfort. Thus, order and community were established on the banks of the Chena.

The Northern Commercial Company, commonly called the N. C. Company, bought Barnette's store, and by autumn five hundred cabins were home to 1200 people, who on November 10, 1903, at the direction of Judge Wickersham, held an election and voted to incorporate the town of Fairbanks. A seven member town council was elected that at its first meeting in December appointed E. T. Barnette as mayor and Judge Wickersham's brother, Edgar, as deputy United States marshal for the Tanana district. In addition to the top government position, Barnette was appointed alderman and postmaster. At the same meeting the council passed Ordinance No. 1 which let a contract for the establishment of a telephone system.[13]

Despite the absence of adequate provisions the people got through the first winter and thrived socially and politically. In early November the Arctic Brotherhood, a fraternal organization started during Klondike days, held a "smoker" that was hailed as "the most

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[12]Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 28.

[13]Town Council Meeting Minutes, December 8, 1903, City of Fairbanks Historical Records (hereafter CFHR), Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Box 17.

important event in the camp" next to the discovery of gold.[14] Later that month the organization christened its new lodge built on Second Avenue by hosting a community-wide Thanksgiving-night ball which sixty-six men and seventeen women attended. Fairbanks' Christmas gift to itself was incorporation on December 26.

As winter progressed the town council addressed the need for sidewalks, sewers, fire protection, water, electric power and light, garbage collection and mail service. In May 1904, only two years and nine months after Barnette ran aground, the telegraph and telephone systems were operational, the Episcopal Church opened St. Matthew's Hospital, the smallest coin accepted for trade was a twenty-five cent piece, the N. C. Company accepted gold dust at sixteen dollars an ounce and Billie Robertson was the proud owner of the "first and only piano in town."[15] In June Archie Burns received the contract to build a 305 foot long draw bridge at the foot of Cushman Street to span the Chena River, and the Town Council unanimously voted to discontinue the acceptance of gold dust in payment of city accounts.[16] By fall the town boasted 3000 people who mined $350,000 worth of gold.[17] With fifty-three children enrolled in school it was necessary to hire an additional teacher and consider construction of a school building.[18] By the end of the year the amount of gold mined gave the Fairbanks mining region the distinction of being "the

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[14]"The Tanana Gold Fields," *Fairbanks News*, Special Number, May 1904, Candice Waugaman Personal Collection, Fairbanks, Alaska, 6.

[15]Robe, 196-8, and "The Tanana Gold Fields," 9.

[16]Town Council Meeting Minutes, June 7 and 16, 1904. CFHR, Box 17.

[17]Chamber of Commerce, Fairbanks, Alaska, *Tanana Valley Alaska* (Seattle: Metropolitan Press Printing Co., n.d.), Candice Waugaman Personal Collection, Fairbanks, Alaska, n.p.n.

[18]Town Council Meeting Minutes, August 23 and September 13, 1904, CFHR, Box 17.

third great placer mining district of the North."[19] In two years Fairbanks had grown from a trading post on the banks of the Chena into a thriving community intent on permanence.

Growth was not without disaster, however. On July 1, 1905, a flood did an estimated $50,000 worth of damage, and a fire on May 22, 1906, destroyed much of the business section, resulting in a $1,500,000 loss.[20] After both catastrophes Fairbanksans rebuilt and the "new town" included a second hospital (St. Joseph's Hospital, operated by the Sisters of Saint Ann for the Catholic Church) which opened on Thanksgiving day 1906.[21] By 1907 the area boasted 5000 residents, 142 of them enrolled in the public school. A well supplied business and professional district provided all the merchandise and services required by the residents, and the town fathers proudly boasted that over three million dollars had been invested in the construction of the principal buildings.[22] In 1910 Fairbanks and the surrounding camps held 7675 people or 12 per cent of the territory's population.[23]

For the largest community in Alaska, over one million dollars appropriated to Alaska by Congress improved an infrastructure commensurate with its status.[24] The

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[19]Robe, 11.

[20]*Tanana Directory, 1907*, N.p., n.d., Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 116.

[21]Stella Muckenthaller, "The Inception and Early Development Years of St. Joseph Hospital, Fairbanks, Alaska" (M.S. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1967), Alaska Nurses' Association Collection, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 7, Box 18, Folder 274, 44.

[22]*Tanana Directory, 1907*, 116-7.

[23]Alden M. Rollins, Compiler, *Census Alaska: Numbers of Inhabitants, 1792-1970* (Anchorage: University of Alaska Anchorage Library, 1978), 574.

[24]"Uncle Sam Spending Large Sum in Alaska," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, October 5, 1910.

expectation that government aid would assist in building Fairbanks was not unusual. Geographer Isaiah Bowman has noted that twentieth century pioneers demanded federal assistance to improve their quality of life. "The older pioneer," Bowman wrote, "thought in terms of labor rather than of government."[25] More recent pioneers, he stated, abandon freely their dreams if things do not work out, seeking the shelter of cities with steady jobs and regular wages. However, for those who stick to their dreams, "hopefulness is epidemic."[26] Numbered among those hopefuls were women who came north with visions of a better life.

Although statistics do not document how many women were part of the early Fairbanks population, it is known that they were present from the beginning.[27] In May 1903, when Ellen Gibson arrived from Dawson with the ambition to build and operate a fancy hotel, she was the sixth woman to call the new town home.[28] Because there is no census data available for Fairbanks until 1910, examination of the 1900 census and the records of the Pioneer Women of Alaska organization provides insight about the women who settled in Alaska's "golden heart" during its early years of development.

At the turn of the century under three per cent of Alaska's 45,786 non-Native inhabitants were women, and two-thirds to three-fourths of these were married. Over half

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[25]Isaiah Bowman. *The Pioneer Fringe*, American Geographical Society, Special Publication No. 13, Edited by G. M. Wrigley (New York: American Geographical Society, 1931), 27.

[26]Ibid.

[27]For information about women's lives in early Fairbanks see: Jo Anne Wold. *This Old House: The Story of Clara Rust, Alaska Pioneer* (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Company, 1976) and Margaret E. Murie, *Two In The Far North* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

[28]Ellen Gibson to Tom, Elmer and Joe Gibson, May 26, 1903, Sarah Ellen Gibson Collection (hereafter SEGC), Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Box 1, Folder 71.

of the men living in the territory were single and between the ages of thirty and forty-four.[29] The Pioneer Women of Alaska organization was chartered in February 1916 as a sorority for white women who had come north before January 1, 1908, and ultimately made Fairbanks home. One third of these women who arrived during Fairbanks' first five years of existence were foreign born with origins mostly in Western Europe and Scandinavia. These figures are consistent with those of cities on the American frontier in the mid-1800s that benefited from immigrants who brought with them skills and capital.[30] Of the two thirds of the Fairbanks women born in the United States, most were from the mid-west, the plains states and the west. Twenty-six per cent of the American born members came from California and Washington, whose ports of San Francisco and Seattle supplied Alaska.[31] Most of these women were married and came with their husbands. However, single, widowed and divorced women were present also.

As previously mentioned, most early Fairbanks residents came into the Tanana Valley from the played-out gold fields in Dawson. Their 975 mile journey took them down the Yukon River to Fort Gibbon where they transferred to smaller steamers for the trip up the Tanana River. At the town of Chena they again switched to smaller vessels or walked the seven miles into Fairbanks. Some newcomers came directly from the port cities of San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle to St. Michael on Alaska's western coast. From here they traveled 1176 miles by river steamer to their new homes.[32] Although

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[29]James H. Ducker, *Carmack's Alaskans: A Census Study of Alaskans in 1900* (Alaska Historical Commission, 1983), 1, 5, 25.

[30]Wade, 68.

[31]An analysis of the membership data for the Pioneer Women of Alaska appears in Appendices A, B, C, and D of this work.

[32]*Tanana Directory, 1907*, 116.

expensive and time consuming, the later route was luxurious by comparison but not without incident. Coming to Nome in 1900 for that district's gold rush, Clara J. Holmes Maloney recorded that while at sea aboard the *Victoria*, "a man stabbed a woman and the captain put him in irons. Another man died and was buried at sea. . . . The Considine brothers who figured in the shooting fray at Seattle in later years were also aboard the boat."[33]

Traveling north by ship to Skagway was a common route for the initial Klondike stampeders. Laura O'Flanagan remembered that in January 1898 she and her husband were stranded on Lewis Island, fifteen miles southeast of Ketchikan, for a week after their steamer the *Corona* wrecked. Rescued by the *Oregon*, the survivors proceeded to Wrangell. From there they journeyed north to Skagway, mushed over the trail to Lake Bennett, built two scows and sailed for Dawson. One of four women in company with fourteen men, Laura and her party took a wrong channel at Five Fingers Rapids and the front portion of their boat was torn off. They finally reached Dawson safely, where they lived for a number of years before moving to the Tanana Valley. The route from Dawson to Chena took thirty days on the river, and then they walked the last seven miles into Fairbanks.

Some people chose the overland trail route between Valdez and Fairbanks to make their entrance into the Interior. At the age of thirty-eight the widowed Emma McKinnon and her small son headed to Fairbanks in the winter over the Valdez Trail. Undaunted by the difficulty of such travel she remarked later, "If I had to do it all over again, the only thing I would change would be that I'd come to Fairbanks younger than I did."[34]

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[33]Clara J. Holmes Maloney, Member's Recollections, Pioneer Women of Alaska, CRC.

[34]Ibid., Laura O'Flanagan and Emma McKinnon.

Unlike the earlier movement west few women dwelt on hardship or commented on the natural surroundings as they journeyed north. However, Susie Stewart could not resist sharing her emotions on first landing in Skagway. As her ship docked at Moore's Wharf she remembered, "The Mountains looked so cold and forbidding. I felt so small and so lonely and I wondered why I had come to such a Lord's Forgotten Country." Most women were so intent on reaching the hoped for better life in the north that they remained determined but open-minded. Enroute to Fairbanks from Dawson, Gertrude Clemens recorded, "We floated down the Yukon in [a] small boat. When we reached Rampart it looked good so there we lived"—for thirty years. It was 1938 before she saw Fairbanks. Others endured unimaginable heartache to reach their destination. In 1898, fed up with Dawson, Mrs. Joe Davis, her husband and infant son sailed down the Yukon headed Outside. Enroute her husband and baby became ill, died and were buried at St. Michael. Alone, she continued to Seattle where she lived with her parents for three years before returning to Dawson with her father to dispose of mining property. While there her father died, and once again she made the solitary journey to Seattle and ultimately remarried. This husband died eighteen months later. After two years she married her third husband, and together they moved to Fairbanks.[35]

Regardless of the time it took or the hardship of the journey, as soon as women reached their destinations they busied themselves creating homes. References to Fairbanks as "the camp" are found in the early literature. In fact, Fairbanks was founded as a commercial and social center to support prospectors and miners who established camps in the hills around the population center. Those who lived in the outlying camps came into

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[35]Ibid., Susie Stewart, Gertrude Clemens, Mrs. Joe Davis.

Fairbanks for supplies, and their trips frequently coincided with special community functions like summer solstice with its midnight baseball game or the two day Fourth of July celebration.[36] When people came into Fairbanks for shopping and socializing they usually stayed in a friend's home. Most early pioneers acquired lots for their homes through "squatters rights," and on this property they constructed log cabins made from trees cut on the premises.[37] Although most cabins were small they were comfortable and showed the efforts of women's work. Kitchen shelves were lined with cans and jars filled with their preserved garden harvest, and living and dining rooms displayed cheery flowered wall paper, lace curtains at windows, carpeted floors, and fine china and silver.[38]

The first couple of winters in Fairbanks supplies were meager forcing women to economize and adopt ingenious methods for creating comfortable homes. Solid wood banana packing crates were frequently retrieved from the N. C. Company and covered with brightly colored fabric to create end-tables.[39] Homemaker and mother Ida Crook recalled that in the winter of 1904 her family ran out of coal oil and candles, and no store carried children's clothing. "The only light I had was grease in a saucer in which I placed a wick. I also had to make everything my boys wore right down to their foot wear. I made moccasins and mitts" fashioned from moosehide.[40] Clara Rust recalled that "In spite of

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[36]Wold, 142-3.

[37]John A. Clark, "Random Reminiscences of Twenty-Two Years in Alaska," John A. Clark Papers, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Box 1, Folder 2, 45.

[38]For photographs of the interiors of Fairbanks homes prior to 1910 see the MacKay and Whitely collections, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

[39]Wold, 175.

[40]Ida Crook, Member's Recollections, Pioneer Women of Alaska, CRC.

our modest surroundings, we were never ashamed of our homes, nor did we apologize for the makeshift arrangements. Rather, we prided ourselves on every new invention to utilize the materials available."[41] By 1915 frame houses became more common, and many were considered luxurious even by Outside standards.

Although cities have a cultural, social and political focus, above all they are places where people congregate to earn a living. A stable economic base is a prerequisite for these other factors, and women had their hand in the business side of Fairbanks from the beginning. Margaret Brandt, who arrived as a widow, was the town's telephone operator from 1905 until 1938, and later she subdivided her homestead into what is now called Garden Island. Single when she came north to Nome, Rae Roas Carter worked at dry goods, fur trading, real estate speculation, money lending, dance instruction and mining. When she came to Fairbanks in 1906 she continued her mining interest in the Tanana Valley and Ruby. With her husband whom she married in Dawson, Marshia Latimer Lavery came to Fairbanks in 1904 with a scow-load of groceries that stocked the first Lavery's House of Quality located on the corner of Third and Cushman. When her husband died in 1931 she assumed management of the business and made a substantial investment in her son's business—Lavery Airways. Genevieve Parker arrived in Fairbanks single and established a candy store that after her marriage she continued to operate near Anna Shiek's catering business.[42] Cora Madole Meyers hung out her "Madame Renio: Fortunes Told" sign which she had used in Dawson. When not predicting the future she

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[41]Wold, 181.

[42]Margaret Brandt, Rae Roas Carter, Marshia Latimer Lavery, Genevieve Parker, Anna Shiek, Member's Recollections, Pioneer Women of Alaska, CRC.

earned her living by taking in sewing.[43] Mrs. Godski, widowed in Fairbanks with a small son, found it necessary to take in laundry from the "girls on the Line."[44] In 1907 "five competent lady teachers, including [a] lady principal" educated the community's children,[45] and Dr. Aline Bradley was available for medical treatment.

However industrious, Fairbanks women did not spend all of their time homemaking or earning a living. They had public and social lives also. As in other frontier communities, women organized themselves into benevolent societies intent on helping the less fortunate and improving the quality of life. The pioneer groups were formed early, men's fraternal organizations such as the Masons and Eagles had women's auxiliaries, and each church had a ladies guild. The guilds of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church and St. Joseph's Catholic Church organized annual fund raising "fairs" and dances to benefit their hospitals. These well advertised multi-day events were bazaars at which booths displayed home-baked and hand-sewn items for sale, musical groups entertained, motion picture showings were scheduled at regular intervals, and a Saturday "Charity Ball" drew the town together in a grand finale of music and dancing.[46] In 1907 St. Matthew's proudly reported that they netted $1610.75 from their annual fair.[47]

When woman's suffrage was debated in Alaska in 1912, Fairbanks women organized themselves to address this political issue which led to the founding of the

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[43]Wold., 182.

[44]Ibid., 179.

[45]*Tanana Directory, 1907*, 117.

[46]"Don't Forget the Fair," and "Hospital Fair on Tomorrow," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, October 14 and November 8, 1910.

[47]"Reading Room Statistics," *The Alaskan Churchman*, (February 1907): 4.

Women's Civic Club in 1913. Monitoring issues related to women and the moral fabric of the community, this club, jointly with the Episcopal Church Women's Guild, operated the George C. Thomas Library until local government assumed that responsibility in July 1942.[48] In addition to group contributions, individual women provided community service. For example, when the George C. Thomas Library was threatened with closure due to lack of funds in the fall of 1917, Mrs. A. D. Pardee made a personal donation that allowed the doors to remain open. For her generosity the Town Council publicly offered thanks for her "splendid philanthropy and public-spirited action."[49]

When the local American Red Cross chapter became active at the beginning of World War I, women were instrumental in its administration and participated in the organization's war-time projects of bandage rolling and knitting socks, sweaters and afghans. Through the efforts of Margaret Keenan, Superintendent of Schools, Fairbanks women and children raised thousands of dollars in support of the war effort through a special women's edition of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, school Liberty Bond sales and Red Cross drives.[50]

Not all women's efforts were directed to benevolent social services. Many with cultural interests were instrumental in bringing the performing arts to Fairbanks. Anna Penketh Caskey, an English immigrant educated at the New England conservatory of Music in Boston, held the distinction of directing the first opera performed in Fairbanks in

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[48]Arnold Griese and Ed Bigelow, *O Ye Frost And Cold. The History of St. Matthew's Church, Fairbanks, Alaska* (Fairbanks: St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, 1980), 24.

[49]Town Council Meeting Minutes. September 11, 1917. CFHR, Box 19.

[50]"How Alaskans Backed Uncle Sam." *The Alaskan Churchman* (February 1919): 56-60.

December 1906,[51] and Aline Bradley, a local physician, organized the Fairbanks Oratorio Society in 1907 to present religious vocal music. In 1910 Maude Powell, renowned violinist from New York City, planned a series of recitals,[52] and Mrs. John A. Clark formed a general choral group that gave performances throughout the winter.[53] The community also had a theatrical group that attracted women who enjoyed performing on stage,[54] and Mary Lee Davis is remembered for her lectures on art and literature.[55]

Some historians believe that one draw to America's western frontier was the lack of a social class structure.[56] However, this theory does not appear to apply to the north or Fairbanks. Although family lineage or economics were not considerations for status, a person's length of time in the north afforded a certain prestige announced by membership in the elite pioneer organizations. Isaiah Bowman stated that as communities developed Outside their founding families felt a "sense of proprietorship and accomplishment."[57] This practice applied to early Fairbanks as well and can be seen in the aura of superiority membership in the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches provided for their parishioners

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[51]Anna Penketh Caskey, Member's Recollections, Pioneer Women of Alaska, CRC.

[52]"Woman Violinist To Visit Alaska," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, November 17, 1910.

[53]Ibid., "Choral Club Will Be Formed This Winter," November 15, 1910.

[54]Wold, 27-8.

[55]Jessie Bloom, 1974 Memoir, American Jewish Archives Collection (hereafter AJAC), Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Box 3, Folder 36, 86.

[56]Elliott West, "Beyond Baby Doe: Child Rearing on the Mining Frontier," chap. in *The Women's West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 182.

[57]Bowman, 27.

over those of other denominations, established later.[58] During the early years of development Fairbanks was comprised of log cabins of similar size and configuration. Therefore, housing did not delineate status. But it was not long before frame structures replaced rustic dwellings, and these new homes were equipped with accouterments commensurate with the owners' ability to pay. A woman's dress could also set her apart, and Mary Anderson's Dry Goods and Dress Shop at Fifth and Cushman was well established by 1908 as carrying "very expensive lines of clothing that the average person could not afford."[59] Of the social class system in Fairbanks, Philip Knowlton wrote in 1916: "There is a refreshing absence of distinction in the honorableness of different kinds of work. Social castes, of course, exist, as they always will while men differ in mental power and moral advancement: but the basis of class distinction is natural and inevitable and not artificial."[60] In death, however, social segregation was requested by some. In 1904 Father Monroe of the Catholic Church was granted the westerly one hundred feet of the cemetery for burial of his parishioners.[61]

Even though personal adornment, housing and membership in the "right" church or organization distinguished certain women, the basic social structure of Fairbanks was based on community-wide involvement for entertainment and help. John A. Clark, an attorney in early Fairbanks, recorded in his unpublished reminiscences that " 'society'

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[58]Bloom, 1974 Memoir, AJAC, 89.

[59]Wold, 30.

[60]Philip Knowlton, "What Fairbanks was like way back when [*sic*]," *Sunset Magazine* (July 1916), reprinted in *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, Fairbanks, Alaska, 23rd Annual Progress Edition, 1973, B-21. Skinner Vertical File Collection, file number 651, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

[61]Town Council Meeting Minutes, October 18, 1904, CFHR, Box 17.

consisted of the people who were here [and] those who desired to give parties invited those who were here."[62] He further stated that:

> It was not considered good form to inquire too carefully into the past of your guests, else the list of guests might be unreasonably curtailed. Conversely, if you wanted to go to a party you shouldn't be too particular in investigating the record of your hostess. In fact a good many of the ladies who comprised the society of the town at that time had what was commonly known as a "Dawson past." But then Dawson was on the Canadian side of the line and many cleansing rivers flowed between the two towns, to say nothing of vast virgin forests that covered the land. To a tolerant mind the present and future meant more than the murky past.[63]

Not only did the citizens socialize together, they rallied round anyone in need. Although it was understood that respectable women and children never walked down the "Row" on Fourth Avenue where the prostitutes lived, if one of these women needed assistance due to illness or a burned cabin, other women offered unconditional aid and vice versa. Margaret Murie, a child when she came to Fairbanks in 1911, wrote, "There was a good deal of live-and-let-live. . . . We were all far away from the rest of the world; we had to depend on one another."[64] Sensitivity towards the "sporting women," as prostitutes were called, was not limited to the town's women. Alonzo L. Maxey, a farmer from the Big Delta area southeast of Fairbanks, traveled to Washington, D. C., at his own

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[62]Clark. "Social Events," John A. Clark Papers, Box 1, Folder 37.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Murie, 38.

expense to testify before the House Committee on Territories in the spring of 1912 to express his belief that certain government officials in Alaska were not conducting business in accordance with the law. One concern of Maxey's was the treatment of the prostitutes, whom he believed were "corralled the same as cattle" behind the high board fence that separated their cabins from the rest of town.[65] "It is the Fairbanks Zoological Park," he chastised.[66] In defense of the women, Maxey analyzed that "These women are human. There are men of the same class in the town, but they have votes and run at large. These women. . . are down, so they are being kicked."[67]

A person's need did not have to be life threatening to be considered important. In the early days of small one and two room cabins most women did not have all of the necessities for entertaining. Borrowing from friends and neighbors was the accepted practice, and "If a woman had a very nice looking fern it was certain that that plant would be a guest at every wedding or other social affair in the town."[68]

In 1912 and 1913 when woman's suffrage was discussed, Fairbanks did not appear to engage in much debate, possibly because men generally agreed that women should have the vote. Some, like supporter Bob Bloom who owned a second hand store where people regularly gathered to hash over topics of public concern, believed the female vote would help bolster support from Washington, D. C., for the development of the territory.[69]

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[65]House, *Conditions in Alaska, Hearings House of Representatives, 1912* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1912), 162.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Clark, "Social Events".

[69]Bloom, "Watching Alaska Grow. The Personal Recollections of a Pioneer," AJAC, Box 4, Folder 43, 48.

Other open-minded men believed it was the logical thing to do. What is known is that the bill to enfranchise women was the first law passed by the First Territorial Legislature in March 1913. It was another seven years before ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution gave women the right to vote nationwide.[70]

Suffrage impacted Fairbanks' social conscience beyond simply giving women the right to vote. Although W. F. Thompson's newspaper, the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, published conservative opinions and zealously shielded its readers by what it reported, Fairbanksans had access to Juneau's *The Daily Alaska Dispatch* that presented a more liberal attitude. In 1912 and 1913 the Juneau paper carried a syndicated column pertaining to women's issues which regularly appeared immediately beneath its editorial. In June 1912 a column entitled "Why Women Ask the Right to Vote," written by New York suffragist Mrs. Oliver H. P. Belmont, admonished: "Women want to vote and by the ballot give life and substance to principles which are now crushed and spurned, unheeded by the bosses—principles that will help the weak, curb the strong and be helpful to the struggling masses of the state and nation."[71] Other articles that undoubtedly raised feminist conscience bore such titles as, "Women Should Do the Proposing, Not the Men," "Women Without Franchise Outside Circle of *Real Life* of the World," and "Women, Start a Marriage Strike If You Can't Choose Your Careers."[72]

With the right to vote and a heightened awareness of their potential, Fairbanks women wasted no time in getting involved in policy making. Aline Bradley ran

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[70]Ronald Lautaret. Compiler, *Alaskan Historical Documents Since 1867* (Jefferson. North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1989), 87.

[71]*The Daily Alaska Dispatch*, Juneau. Alaska. June 27, 1912.

[72]Ibid., January 23, May 8, and June 24, 1912.

unsuccessfully for a seat on the Town Council, but this did not stop her from becoming active in other political arenas. As chairman of "The Fourth Division Drys," a Fairbanks women's organization that lobbied for enforcement of prohibition laws, Dr. Bradley established an influential relationship with Territorial Governor John F. A. Strong. Her appointment by Governor Strong as a member of the medical board for the Fourth Judicial Division and work with him as an advisor on maintenance of the "8-hour law" regulating the work day helped to prepare her for a new career in the law.[73] She was admitted to the Alaska Bar in October 1917.[74]

As in the rest of the country, divorce and separation were increasingly common, but statistics are unavailable for the early days of Fairbanks.[75] However, an article that appeared in the *Daily News-Miner* in April 1914 hints that the numbers of dissolved marriages may have been high. On March 30 a rival newspaper, the *Citizen*, published an article questioning the legality of marriages if a designated waiting period had not occurred between a divorce and remarriage. After accusing the *Citizen* of criminal action by "questioning as it does the marriage ties that bind Alaskans and the legitimacy of their children by such marriages," the *News-Miner's* Editor reported that as a result "every lawyer in town has been consulted by people whom the article worried."[76] Editor Thompson explained that if the Outside time limit applied to Alaska, which it did not,

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[73]Governor J. F. A. Strong to Aline Bradley, February 7 and September 1, 1917; January 9, 1918, J. F. A. Strong Papers, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Box 1, Folder 25.

[74]"Dr. Bradley Is Admitted To Bar," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, October 2, 1917.

[75]Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 173.

[76]"You Need Not Worry About That Divorce," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, April 4, 1914.

"very many people would be affected."[77] Although divorce apparently did not carry a social stigma, dissolution could create economic hardship for women. Some were forced to rely on their adult children for support or resort to menial jobs.[78] However, others like Margaret Keenan who had a higher level of education or training were able to secure employment and live comfortably.

When the railroad connecting the Interior with Seward on the southern coast opened in 1923 Fairbanks hoped for an immediate boost to its population and economy. During World War I military service and railroad construction jobs had siphoned off many of the men, leaving the general area with only 1400 residents. The outlook was not entirely bleak, however. All along the federal government had backed the establishment of various institutions that helped Fairbanks survive and ultimately grow. The agricultural and mining experimental stations, opened in 1906 and 1917 respectively, boosted Fairbanks, and the opening of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines in 1922 helped cement the image of permanence.[79] In addition, Fairbanks housed the administrative offices of the United States district courts, the Bureau of Land Management, the Alaska Road Commission, the United States Department of the Interior, the Division of Forestry, and the Alaska Geology Branch of the Agriculture Experiment Station.

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[77]Ibid.

[78]Wold. 214.

[79]G. W. Gasser. "A Brief History of Agriculture In Alaska." Dr. G. W. Gasser Collection. Archives. Alaska and Polar Regions Department. Elmer E. Rasmuson Library. University of Alaska Fairbanks. Box 1. Folder 2. Sumner S. Smith. *The Mining Industry in the Territory of Alaska During the Calendar Year 1916*. Department of the Interior. Bulletin 153. (Washington. D. C., Government Printing Office 1917), 8.

Although not an economic mainstay, agriculture interested some residents. By 1920 over 1700 acres were under cultivation for barley, wheat and corn, and several dairy farms were operating.[80] For Stacia Barnes Rickert, active engagement in farming became her family's financial base. Prior to her marriage to Paul Rickert, Stacia staked 320 acres of land on the south edge of Fairbanks. Together they cleared 85 acres and started a farm and greenhouse business.[81] After living in several different Alaska locations Stacia declared Fairbanks home and remarked contentedly in her later years, "I don't see now much chance of living anywhere but dear good old Fairbanks on Rickert's ranch where we have no gold nor silver mines but plenty [of] good things to eat."[82]

Mary Miller, who with her husband ran the Miner's Home hotel and restaurant from 1906 until 1922, shared Stacia's love for the north and commented, "I have no intention of living in the States. Besides the heat down there bothers me." Of course not all women found happiness in Alaska. After spending most of her adult life in Fairbanks Catherine McCarthy prepared to move Outside. Her explanation for leaving was curtly expressed when she stated that Alaska "needs younger and stronger women [and besides, I] do not like it and don't know of anyone who does." On the other hand, Mary Kline Bunnell believed Fairbanks had "satisfied the spirit of this pioneer," and many were proud simply to be numbered among the early settlers of Alaska, America's last frontier.[83]

Mining initiated the original settlement of the Fairbanks area, but its growth and development are attributed to its people, and their intangible qualities of loyalty and

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[80]Wold, 183.

[81]"Fairbanks, the Metropolis of Interior Alaska." *The Pathfinder of Alaska* (May, 1921): 17.

[82]Stacia Rickert, Member's Recollections, Pioneer Women of Alaska, CRC.

[83]Ibid., Mary Miller, Catherine McCarthy, Mary Kline Bunnell.

identification escape measurement. In some cases there was deprivation, hardship and heartache, but as pioneer Agnes Thomas recorded, ". . .it's one's reaction to any difficulty which may arise that matters—not the problem itself."[84]

From the beginning women added a sense of grace to Fairbanks. Like other American frontier women their dedicated hard work and commitment helped shape a solid multi-faceted community that grew quickly into a sophisticated and permanent town.

[84]Ibid., Agnes Thomas.

Chapter Two

Sarah Ellen Gibson
circa 1860-1908

...there is not another woman
could or would do all I have done
or would of drove a Horse on the road I did
I am positive of it.[1]

The Klondike stampede started instantly when the gold laden *Excelsior* docked in San Francisco Bay on July 14, 1897. News of the "unlikely-looking lot of millionaires" and their gilded cargo rippled north, and three days later when the *Portland* reached Seattle thousands of curious onlookers crowded to see the treasure brought from the Eldorado and Bonanza creeks in the Yukon Territory.[2] For some time rumors had been circulating about a big strike, but no one dared to believe it until proof appeared before their eyes.[3] If Joe and Ellen Gibson did not visit the dock to witness the unloading of suitcases heavy with hundreds of dollars worth of gold, they certainly read the *San Francisco Chronicle* headlines the next day: "SACKS OF GOLD FROM MINES OF

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[1]Ellen Gibson to Joe, Elmer and Tom Gibson, May 8, 1903, SEGC (see chap. 1, n. 28), Box 1, Folder 69.

[2]Frances Backhouse, *Women of the Klondike* (Vancouver/Toronto: Whitecap Books, 1995), 3.

[3]Pierre Berton, *The Klondike Fever* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 100-5.

THE CLONDYKE [*sic*]."[4] As for other Americans weary from economic depression and distress, these tidings revived the Gibsons' broken-down spirits.

By mid-August thirty-one boats carrying 15, 595 hopeful prospectors were headed north to Dawson,[5] that small town tucked away on the Canadian Yukon River that quickly grew into the largest city north of Seattle and west of Winnipeg.[6] At its peak it bulged with thirty thousand residents, and the entire world watched as its inhabitants struggled to realize their dream of riches. Joe Gibson's decision to participate in this unique experience was fueled by lack of employment and a troubled marriage. With bleak prospects for betterment in California, the lure of the Klondike provided hope. Like many Klondikers, Joe and Ellen anticipated that a fresh start in a land of adventure and economic promise would bolster their sagging relationship and fatten their bank account. Aboard the steamer *Elder*, Joe began his journey north in mid-August, leaving Ellen and their two sons, Tom and Elmer, in San Francisco, where Ellen continued working as a seamstress to earn her living. Joe's departure marked the beginning of a tumultuous phase of Ellen's life as she impulsively stretched her physical and emotional limits in search of an illusive dream.

Joe's letters to his family during his journey to Dawson were typical of his compatriots' who chose the arduous Chilkoot Trail route. He reported a trail "lined with dead horses mules and donkey, 2 meny have gone clean crazy from pur dispair. Men who never did any hard work and never worked in the woods are a pittyful sight to behold.

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[4]Melanie J. Mayer, *Klondike Women: True Tales of the 1897-1898 Gold Rush* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1989), 3.

[5]Ibid., 19.

[6]Backhouse, 3.

[*sic*]"[7] From Lake Lindeman he wrote, "the state of affairs on the trail is past description, all stages of misery from sichness and distress to actual starvation only those with the most money or the strongest will ever get through. [*sic*]"[8] Downcast, wet and cold most of the time, Joe punctuated his description of the conditions with longings for his family and endearments to Ellen: "I send my true love to you dear little wife....good by darling my heart is heavy to-night I am lonesome."[9] An early start, good physical condition from previous employment on the Canadian Pacific Railroad and determination made it possible for Joe to reach Dawson before winter set in, only to witness many arrivals, discouraged by food and housing shortages, turning back. In his history of the Klondike stampede, Pierre Berton wrote, "those who had been frantic to reach the Klondike were just as frantic to leave it now." It was as though the adventure of getting there was the goal.[10] Apparently Joe had adequate provisions, which quelled any panic he might have felt, and he secured a mining job at 13 Eldorado, fourteen miles outside of Dawson, where he spent the winter in a tent. Although conditions must have been primitive, he ignored Dawson's setback and remained optimistic. Compared to what was happening in town, his camp life felt comfortable and secure.

In Dawson that winter gold was plentiful, but there was nothing to buy. Men lounged their days away and at night lost thousands at gambling tables while sipping two hundred dollar a glass whiskey. For one dollar a minute a lonely prospector could "waltz with a girl in a silk dress [and] under certain conditions [he could] buy the girl in the silk

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[7]Joe Gibson to Ellen Gibson, August 26, 1897, SEGC, Box 1, Folder 11.

[8]Ibid., September 29, 1897, Box 1, Folder 12.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Berton, 174.

dress too."[11] Living in a male dominated tent city at a mine outside of town made it easier for Joe to economize and stick with his resolve to remain faithful to Ellen. Concentration on his dream of staking a claim and acquiring a cabin for his family in Dawson kept him optimistic.

In January 1898, Joe wrote to Ellen that she and the boys should plan to join him that summer. His invitation did not include details about his mining profits, but his expectations for the family's financial success were high. Joe predicted that Ellen and the boys could earn more money than he, and he calculated that within a couple of years the family could save three to four thousand dollars that would allow them to "get a home some place and be some body."[12] If she would bring her sewing machine, thread, needles and her wringer, she could continue her seamstress business and take in laundry. Certainly Ellen was delighted at the economic prospects that Joe prophesied, and she also must have been encouraged at his claim that, "I am a changed man I can tell you no strangers for me any more. [*sic*]"[13]

Although the all-water Yukon River route to the Klondike was the longest and most expensive way to reach Dawson, Joe encouraged Ellen to book passage on an Alaska Commercial Company ship, and that summer she and her teenaged sons started north. It is unclear whether Ellen latched on too quickly to some advertised bargain priced tickets or if the steamship company did not fully explain its fare, because she and the boys discovered at St. Michael that their tickets took them no further. Penniless but determined to reach Dawson, Ellen refused the company's offer of free passage back to

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[11]Ibid., 186.

[12]Joe Gibson to Ellen Gibson, January 30, 1898, SEGC, Box 1, Folder 14.

[13]Ibid., n.d., Box 1, Folder 15.

San Francisco in favor of working to earn the money necessary to complete the remaining seventeen hundred miles.[14] When Ellen and the boys finally arrived in Dawson they found a bustling community of eighteen thousand people that by freeze-up had grown to over thirty thousand.[15] As Joe predicted, the production and care of clothing could be a lucrative business, and Ellen took advantage of her skills when she learned that "industrious washerwomen could make thousands of dollars a year."[16] In February 1899, Ellen staked a gold claim at No. 24 Above Gold Bottom Creek,[17] and later that year she purchased the Montana Steam Laundry from Peter Petersen for five hundred dollars on terms of twenty-five dollars a month.[18] With hired assistants Ellen ran her business for several years while raising her sons, maintaining a prolific correspondence with curious relatives and friends and managing the family's finances, all of which became more and more her responsibility.

Tom and Elmer Gibson were aged seventeen and fifteen respectively when they arrived in Dawson. Like many youngsters in the Klondike, they worked with their father on his mining claim until they became disillusioned by the amount of money and effort that went into the ground only to see nothing come out. Tom moved into Dawson after a year where he alternately helped his mother with her laundry, worked on the dock loading and unloading freight and hunted game and fowl to sell to the meat-starved residents. His favorite hunting partner was his younger brother until Elmer grew restless in the transient

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[14]Backhouse, 81.

[15]Berton, 300.

[16]Backhouse, 78-9.

[17]"Grant for Placer Mining," Certificate No. 20500, SEGC, Box 5, Folder 423.

[18]Ibid., "Sale agreement," December 13, 1899, Box 6, Folder 430.

and unsettled community and moved back to California where he earned a meager living at odd jobs.[19] In 1901 he wrote to his mother from the Presidio in San Francisco that after getting into "a little trouble" he joined the Army using the assumed name, "Robert."[20] Insisting that his misfortune was behind him he asked Ellen to invite anyone in Dawson who might be traveling to San Francisco to look him up "for old time sake" even though he sheepishly admitted, "I know I am not much."[21] Eventually Ellen enticed him to return north, playing heavily on a job offer in her laundry and Tom's hunting success.

Because of the general economic slump Outside, many women were curious how the Gibsons fared and what employment opportunities existed. Most of Ellen's relatives concluded she was getting "rich out in that golden country" but expressed no interest in joining the stampede,[22] and a Santa Rosa friend who enjoyed hearing of Ellen's adventures inquired, "Do you have vegetables up there or do you live on *gold dust*[?]"[23] Some of Ellen's friends, ready to move north at great personal sacrifice, desired specific information to help them prepare. Mrs. G. Rutland, whose husband was terminally ill, wrote that she was desperate to "work for my babys [*sic*]."[24] Optimistically, she asked for an honest assessment of conditions in Dawson but boldly declared that even if "I do not here [*sic*] from you I shall be in Dawson as soon as I can get in, but I will not take my children,"

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[19]Audrey Loftus, "Tom Gibson—Meat Hunter," *Alaska Sportsman* (June 1967): 19.

[20]Elmer Gibson to Ellen Gibson, August 20, 1901, SEGC, Box 1, Folder 40.

[21]Ibid., n.d., Box 1, Folder 41.

[22]Ibid., Niece to Ellen Gibson, October 27, 1902, Box 1, Folder 57.

[23]Ibid., M. L. Murphy to Ellen Gibson, September 1902, Box 1, Folder 55.

[24]Ibid., Mrs. G. Rutland to Ellen Gibson, March 21, 1899, Box 1, Folder 23.

whom she reluctantly said would spend the time with relatives.[25] Two years later Mrs. Rutland shared the story of her attempt at self-sufficiency with Ellen. During the summer of 1899 Mr. Rutland died, the children were sent to a grandmother in Texas, and Mrs. Rutland sailed north as far as St. Michael. From there she wrote Ellen several letters and sent word of her presence with every Dawson-bound traveler she met. Hearing nothing from Ellen, she assumed the Gibsons had left the Klondike, and Mrs. Rutland returned to California to live on a pension from her deceased husband.[26]

Mrs. William Brunelle had worked previously for Ellen in Dawson but returned to Seattle, leaving her husband to mine. After some time with no word from her husband she wrote to Ellen asking if she could regain her job in the laundry and if Ellen knew how her husband was getting along. In anticipation of reemployment, Mrs. Brunelle had placed her small son in a Catholic School on the outskirts of Seattle and was ready to return to Dawson.[27]

Ellen's correspondence with another former employee was not as congenial. The laundry accounts showed that she had overpaid an assistant, and Ellen wrote to her asking that the three dollar and fifty cent error be returned. The stunned woman responded with her own calculations that indicated Ellen actually owed her four dollars.[28] Ellen's indignant rejoinder outlined Mrs. Currie's poor work habits and delinquencies remarking,

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[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid., February 1, 1901, Box 1, Folder 33.

[27]Ibid., Mrs. William Brunelle to Ellen Gibson, June 1901, Box 1, Folder 37.

[28]Ibid., Mrs. T. W. Currie to Ellen Gibson, October 12, 1901, Box 1, Folder 45.

"as for me owing you you were not worth what I paid you for the hole month. [*sic*]"[29] Ignoring Mrs. Currie's arithmetic, Ellen concluded her diatribe with the generous remark that, "I will make you a present of the extra pay."[30]

Other business matters required more delicate communication. Even though Joe had promised to send Ellen five hundred dollars for her passage to Dawson she apparently needed more and borrowed from F. S. Osgood, an Oakland, California friend. In the fall of 1900, Mr. Osgood requested Ellen repay the loan. Explaining his own failed business dealings and personal desperation, Osgood admitted he had not recorded the amount due him, believing Ellen would remember.[31] Almost a year later, debt still unpaid, Osgood made another appeal.[32] Given Ellen's attention to detail negligence to this responsibility hints that the Gibsons had not enjoyed the economic success they hoped the Klondike would provide. Ellen asked Elmer, then at the Presidio, to visit Mr. Osgood and explain her situation.

In the spring of 1901, Joe received a letter from a Dawson attorney who represented a local physician demanding payment of a long overdue two hundred dollar bill. The letter stated that a few days prior Ellen had seen the firm's law clerk and informed him that they "could not pay and would not until [they] were ready to do so."[33] Although she expected others to understand, Ellen had an incredulous attitude towards those desiring her assistance, and even an advance of five hundred dollars to her husband

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[29]Ibid., Ellen Gibson to Mrs. Currie, October 19, 1901, Box 1, Folder 47.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid., F. S. Osgood to Ellen Gibson, September 16, 1900, Box 1, Folder 27.

[32]Ibid., June 14, 1901, Box 1, Folder 39.

[33]Ibid., Woodworth & Black to Joe Gibson, April 27, 1901, Box 1, Folder 35.

Joe and his two partners necessitated legal evaluation. As collateral the men offered their Vulcan Coal Mine. However, a search initiated by Ellen revealed that they did not have clear title.[34] It is unclear how Ellen handled this matter, but what is obvious is that Ellen paid close attention to her own business matters.

The disappointment of unfulfilled economic dreams created tension that permeated the Gibsons' relationship, and the loss of their home to fire in the winter of 1903 added stress to an already gloomy relationship. The days of work mixed with cranberry picking, evenings at the theater and sipping "fine tea" with friends were replaced by the tedium of constant strain and worry.[35] Although she wrote to her friend and former employee, Rose Meder, who had returned to Indiana, that all was well, debt mounted, income declined and Ellen's relationship with Joe eroded. While Ellen continued to run her business, Joe lost interest in expending great effort for minimal return, and he spent more and more of his time and money frequenting local saloons. No longer interested in working the family claim, he took a job as a laborer at the Rock Creek Coal mine, whose owner, Arthur D. Hiscock, paid Joe's wages directly to Ellen.[36] As Joe retreated to the familiarity of his former ways, Ellen filled the gap his absence created with other companions, one of whom would play a major role in the next phase of her search for happiness and security.

In the summer of 1899 a tent city sprang up at Nome on the Alaskan beaches of the Bering Strait where for thirteen miles rockers and sluice boxes were in motion uncovering a predicted two million dollars in gold. In one week in August eight thousand people left Dawson in search of another rainbow's end. Pierre Berton reminisced: "And

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[34]Ibid., Belcourt, McDougal & Smith to Ellen Gibson, September 28, 1901, Box 1, Folder 44.

[35]Ibid., Rose Meder to Ellen Gibson, January 26, 1902, Box 1, Folder 52.

[36]Ibid., Arthur D. Hiscock to Ellen Gibson, August 4, 1902, Box 5, Folder 419.

so just three years, almost to the day, after Robert Henderson encountered George Carmack here on the swampland at the Klondike's mouth, the great stampede ended as quickly as it had begun."[37] Joe and Ellen hung on, hopeful that something would change the tide, but nothing came close to re-creating those glorious years when Dawson glittered in the spotlight.

Many who remained in Dawson after the dash to Nome considered this the best period. As the town settled back to ordinary business it gained an atmosphere of permanence. Churches and a library were built, frame houses occupied former cabin and tent sites, and roads were improved. More than one Klondiker remarked the place had finally become "civilized."[38] But Ellen still hoped for riches, and a staid community of nine thousand could not provide the impetus to fuel her dreams. Word in 1902 of Alaska's Tanana Valley gold strike sounded a second chance, and Ellen's new vision began to take shape.

Familiar with Belinda Mulrooney's successful Grand Forks Hotel at the confluence of Eldorado and Bonanza creeks and her Fairview Hotel in Dawson, Ellen envisioned a similar stylish establishment in the new town of Fairbanks under construction on the banks of the Chena River. Because Joe had drained her emotional and financial resources in Dawson, Ellen concluded he had no part in her new venture in another frontier community. However, Hannah Mullen and Will Butler, her choice of business partners and traveling companions, were considered by some to be no better than the man she planned to leave.

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[37]Berton, 413.

[38]Backhouse, 179.

Hannah Mullen, Ellen's assistant in the Montana Laundry, had a reputation as a moody woman who insisted on her creature comforts. Her ability to make the rugged spring journey into Fairbanks and adapt to a fledgling mining town came into question. Will Butler, an Irish immigrant, was considered a restless, spendthrift drinker, not to be trusted. Because the most vocal opposition to her choices came from her husband Joe and William Lane, a jilted admirer, Ellen indignantly disregarded their protests.[39]

In January 1903 Jujiro Wada, the Japanese cook on E. T. Barnette's steamer the *Isabelle*, was sent by Barnette from Fairbanks to Dawson to share the news of a rich gold strike in the Tanana Valley. Hearing the news, people poured out of depressed Dawson headed to the new fields, and in February Ellen finalized plans for her new venture, which in addition to a hotel included a merchandise store. At the same time Carl M. Johanson, U. S. Commissioner at Eagle, went to Fairbanks to assess the mining operations.[40] If Ellen heard his report that the strike claims had been exaggerated and the same scarcity of provisions and lack of jobs that Dawson had experienced during its stampede were present in the Tanana Valley, she was undaunted because she proceeded to close down her laundry while Will and Hannah made a quick buying trip to San Francisco. April 2 the three executed a legal partnership agreement and prepared to leave Dawson.[41] Driving two horses top-heavy with goods and a dog sled loaded with provisions and Ellen's kitten, the party followed the Yukon River to Forty Mile, which they reached on April 4, then proceeded on to Circle. From there they planned to travel the most direct route into the Tanana Valley, following roughly what is today the Steese Highway. Reports, however,

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[39]William Lane to Ellen Gibson, June 27, 1903. SEGC, Box 1, Folder 80.

[40]Robe (see chap. 1, n. 3), 165.

[41]"Articles of Agreement." April 2, 1903. SEGC, Box 6, Folder 433.

by Judge James Wickersham's party, a few days ahead of Ellen's, warned that a severe blizzard had closed the trail and passage with horses was impossible.[42] Ellen's group had no choice but to continue on the Yukon River to Tanana, wait for the river ice to break up and continue on into Fairbanks by scow. The month-long trip was arduous. At Tanana, Ellen reported that she and Hannah were "the only white women ever came here there is 50 men and no women here. [*sic*]"[43] While harnessing the horse she had driven over the trail, it hit her in the mouth, breaking one of Ellen's front teeth, and her kitten, that had traveled in a box, escaped. Her party spent half a day retrieving it. Most of the time she was wet and cold, and one of their horses drowned crossing the Tanana River. The week at Tanana provided needed rest and gave Ellen time to reflect on her experience. Recounting the trials she remarked, "I wish I had waited for the boat to run but it is all over now I mean the Hardness of the trip. [*sic*]"[44] Optimistically, Ellen turned her thoughts to the future.

In March 1903 Episcopal and Presbyterian congregations were established in Fairbanks, and the next month Barnette deeded a parcel of abandoned land at Cushman Street and Third Avenue for use as a court house and jail site and Wickersham officially moved his court to Fairbanks. Many people believed that these acts assured the permanence of Fairbanks and increased its business prospects. Because most of the stampeders were more interested in commercial rather than mining prospects in the new town, this should have been good news, but regardless of these signs men were streaming out of the valley shortly after they arrived. Believing that Barnette and Wada had

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[42]Wickersham, *Old Yukon* (see chap. 1, n. 3), 170-4.

[43]Ellen Gibson to Tom and Elmer Gibson, May 8, 1903, SEGC, Box 1, Folder 69.

[44]Ibid.

intentionally spread lies about the richness of the country caused many residents to dub the entire event a "fake stampede," and there was talk about hanging Wada. The facts that Barnette had previously left the territory for Seattle and Wada fled at hearing the rumor of violence probably averted tragedy.[45]

The initial stampeders were deserting Fairbanks as Ellen arrived on May 25, 1903, but she appeared unconcerned compared to the joy she felt at being met by old friends who had preceded her from Dawson. She found a community of one thousand people, only five of whom were women,[46] and three hundred eighty-seven cabins.[47] Some lots with cabins were selling for as little as ten dollars as disillusioned prospectors fled the valley.[48] Taking advantage of the cheap land Ellen, with Will Butler's help, staked and cleared a fifty-by one hundred fifty-foot commercial lot on First Avenue on which she planned to build her thirty-by sixty-foot hotel.[49] Her dream initiated, Ellen staked four residential lots on which she intended to build rental cabins.[50] In anticipation of financial backing she wrote her sons that, "The Hotel is mine alone no partners only Willie he will always be my partner if Hanna stays she will work for wages. Keep this part to your self only tell [friends] that the business is mine alone so they need not be afraid to trust me. [*sic*]"[51]

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[45]Robe, 165-9.

[46]Ellen Gibson to Tom and Elmer Gibson, May 26, 1903, SEGC, Box 1, Folder 71.

[47]Wickersham, 212.

[48]Robe, 171.

[49]Ellen Gibson to Tom and Elmer Gibson, July 20, 1903, SEGC, Box 1, Folder 87.

[50]Ibid., June 24, 1903, Box 1, Folder 79.

[51]Ibid., July 11, 1903, Box 1, Folder 82.

Though staples were in short supply moose, caribou, rabbits and fowl abounded. Ellen assessed the situation quickly, and her business sense told her she could make money selling cigars and liquor by the gallon. "I want whiskey," she wrote to her son, Tom, telling him, "I could get 25 dollars a gallon for it"—twice the cost.[52] In addition Ellen itemized hundreds of pounds of food and furniture for Tom to ship to her in preparation for the opening of her hotel, which she predicted would be finished before the shipment arrived. "But above all," she admonished, "send me licquors all that is needed in a bar also sigars and tobacco. [*sic*]"[53] Liking what she saw and what she believed the future held, Ellen remarked, "I think I will live here for some time if I get a start. . . . I will do well here this next year."[54] Her only complaint was mosquitoes that swarmed "like a moving mass of bees bussing [*sic*] around you day and night."[55]

Ellen's new life in Fairbanks included more adjustment than simply starting her business ventures. Convinced she was better off physically separated from Joe, dissolving the emotional bond to her husband required time. During the first three months after leaving Dawson, Ellen's correspondence to her sons in the Klondike regularly inquired about Joe. Although Ellen doubted her husband cared or missed her, she signed all of her letters "Nellie," Joe's pet name for her, and regardless of the family break-up, Ellen admonished Tom and Elmer to "be good to [Joe] no mater how he hurt me he is your father. [*sic*]"[56] By late June, Ellen was settled in her new surroundings and mention of Joe

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[52]Ibid., May 26, 1903, Box 1, Folder 71.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid., July 11, 1903, Box 1, Folder 82.

[56]Ibid., May 8, 1903, Box 1, Folder 69.

in her letters virtually ceased, and she began to sign them "Ellen." This emotional stability allowed her to focus on raising the money necessary to carry out her business dreams.

When she left Dawson, Ellen had hired a friend to manage property she owned, and Tom was in charge of debt collection. Her son was also to find renters for her cabin on the hill and the former family home in town which Joe had vacated. To get settled and generate immediate cash, Ellen wanted two thousand dollars and the boiler and associated plumbing and hardware from the laundry and a stove she had seen in a Dawson second hand store, all of which she could sell in Fairbanks as mining apparatus. She even asked Joe's destitute widowed mother for financial assistance, which frustrated and deeply hurt the elder Mrs. Gibson.[57] Repeated requests for over sixty gallons of various kinds of liquors and a thousand cheap cigars that she could sell for fifty cents apiece topped her list of money making strategies, and feeling optimistic that it would not be long before she was earning money she confidently told Tom, "I will repay you before long also I will make more for you."[58]

As predicted, Hannah proved difficult as a business partner. By the time the threesome reached Fairbanks both Ellen and Will Butler were fed up with her temperamental moodiness and wanted to pay off their share of expenses and dissolve the partnership agreement, but Will had no money. Ellen's request to Tom for an additional five hundred dollars for Will's share pushed Tom's civility beyond its limits. Not only did Tom have a low opinion of Will, he had no money, nor did anyone else that summer in Dawson. He hounded Kittie Craig, one debtor, so frequently that he complained, "She

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[57]Ibid., Mrs. H. Gibson to Tom Gibson, January 6, 1905, Box 2, Folder 129.

[58]Ibid., Ellen Gibson to Tom and Elmer Gibson, June 1, 1903, Box 1, Folder 72.

runs when ever she sees me, and she don't let me see her often either."[59] In early August Tom despondently told Ellen that he could not send any money or merchandise. "The town is on the hog," he wrote,

> there is people here that have not got a thing to eat. You can't buy yourself a job anywhere.... The groceries you sent for will cost about six hundred dollars and freight about $150.00 and the licquors about $250.00 and duty besides on some it will make at least a thousand dollars cash. There ain't that much in town. [*sic*][60]

Tom had only $32.50 to his name, and he hoped to accumulate over two hundred to see himself through the winter. In addition to his own financial predicament, he found that taking care of himself was a burden:

> By the way I used to here you say that a woman[']s work was never done and this house keeping has made me think so. If I have to keep it up much longer I will be bug house sure. Washing dishes and making bread (I gave that up and would give up washing dishes too only there is no one to do it but me. I have to get a woman to support me decently. [*sic*][61]

When Ellen heard of the dire situation in Dawson she insisted that Tom and Elmer join her in Fairbanks. Even though the new community expected shortages that winter, nothing as desperate as in Dawson was predicted. She told the boys that jobs in wood

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[59]Ibid., Tom Gibson to Ellen Gibson, June 6, 1903, Box 1, Folder 73.

[60]Ibid., August 5, 1903, Box 1, Folder 88.

[61]Ibid.

yards were plentiful, and of course she could use their help in reaching the goals to which she still clung optimistically. Exasperated, Tom's response was brief and to the point. "But for Christ[']s sake don't forget I don[']t work in a bank."[62] Ellen, who always needed the last word, had lost patience:

> I can't understand you being broke....Now Tomy I don[']t want you to sit down and morn up there but get all your belongings together and come this is a fine country to live in....do not let the grass grow under your feet till you are here navigation closes in about 7 weeks....come no matter how you get money for your ticket....I need you so bad there is no work for women here yet—lots for men so all I can say is come I need you don't fail. [*sic*][63]

As frustration mounted Elmer, back from the army and fed up with hard times in Dawson, left for the Outside, and Joe, unwilling to work hard for minimal return, quit his job and spent most of his time in local saloons. Disappointed by his brother's departure and disgusted with his father's degradation, Tom heeded his mother's wish to join her, arriving in Fairbanks in September in time for a successful hunting season, news of which lured Elmer back north.[64] With income from Ellen's home-laundry business, Tom and Elmer's meat profits and presumably something from Will's mining efforts, the foursome spent an uneventful winter.

As soon as the rivers opened in the spring of 1904 Tom returned to Dawson to gather Ellen's remaining personal possessions and make purchases for her that the

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[62]Ibid., Tom Gibson to Ellen Gibson, August 23, 1903, Box 1, Folder 91.

[63]Ibid., Ellen Gibson to Tom Gibson, August 25, 1903, Box 1, Folder 92.

[64]Loftus, 21.

previous year's finances prohibited. With money he could earn or collect Tom bought Ellen a hat, hair combs and some garden seeds which he shipped to Fairbanks saying, "I have done the best I could. Hope its all right, there is nothing here so the sooner I get there the better even if I am broke."[65] In July he started back to Fairbanks, earning some money freighting other people's goods along the way from Dawson to Tanana.

By spring 1905 Ellen's dream hotel was still an illusion, and her Dawson property manager sent devastating news that due to non-payment of mortgages the bank had foreclosed on her coal property and the two houses.[66] Although Will had staked a twenty-acre placer claim in the Big Delta Country of the Fairbanks Mining District in January, he did not have the money to begin working it.[67] He believed that a temporary move Outside would cure his financial problems, and in August he left for San Francisco to find a job. Immediately, however, he regretted his decision to leave Ellen behind. From St. Michael he wrote, "I am feeling so homesick that I am so sorry that I ever left Fairbanks. I wish I was near you again and you bet your sweet life that I would stay until you were ready to come with me."[68] A day after arriving in Seattle he wrote Ellen that he was already discouraged with business prospects and fed up with the Outside. Unless she promised to join him immediately he planned to return to Fairbanks. Yielding to Will's tug, in late September Ellen began the five week journey to California only to learn, when she arrived, that Will had already headed north, apparently unaware that Ellen was enroute to join him.

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[65]Tom Gibson to Ellen Gibson, July 11, 1904, SEGC, Box 2, Folder 118.

[66]Ibid., J. H. Tomlinson to Ellen Gibson, April 27, 1905, Box 2, Folder 135.

[67]Placer Mining Claim #8212, "Mining Locations, Fairbanks Precinct, Third Division, March 1, 1905 to May 23, 1905," Volume 5, State of Alaska Recorder's Office, Fairbanks, Alaska, 338.

[68]Will Butler to Ellen Gibson, August 20, 1905, SEGC, Box 2, Folder 142.

Out of money, Will's return trip Outside was delayed. Although Ellen knew that Tom thought little of Will, she directed her son to provide Will with the funds necessary for his return fare.

While waiting for Will to return to California, Ellen learned from a friend that Joe had followed her to San Francisco and was spreading stories of how she had deserted him in Dawson for another man. Angered by his actions, Ellen filed for divorce. Lonely for Will and distraught by Joe's presence, Ellen busied herself with yet another way to make money—real estate ventures. In need of cash for her proposed business dealings, as before, she wired Tom in Fairbanks to send money. Tom's reply sent shivers down Ellen's spine.

Edward B. Condon, a Fairbanks attorney and Ellen's property manager, refused to turn over rent receipts to Tom, saying he needed the money for his personal business ventures. Simultaneously, Ezra Decoto, the Oakland lawyer handling Ellen's divorce, informed her that he could not proceed until she paid him eighty-five dollars—money Ellen did not have.[69] Blaming Condon for her circumstances and in need of some breathing room, Ellen left the city to visit friends in Valley Springs, one hundred miles northeast of San Francisco, while Will worked at a temporary job outfitting dredges on the docks. Discouraged by the tedium, Will wrote to Ellen, "When I go back home to that dear old Alaska I will attend to business closer than I ever did before."[70]

Ellen's disillusionment was compounded by the April 1906 San Francisco earthquake. She returned to the Bay area in search of Will and Elmer, who was also

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[69]Ibid., Ezra W. Decoto to Ellen Gibson, February 12, 1906 and March 14, 1906, Box 2 Folders 164 and 167.

[70]Ibid., Will Butler to Ellen Gibson, April 10, 1906, Box 2, Folder 172.

working on the docks. Finding them safe, Ellen learned that Joe was still in town, drunk most of the time, and a letter from Joe's mother put blame squarely on Ellen's shoulders for the failed twenty-one year marriage.[71] Sharing her outrage with Tom by letter, Ellen instructed him to, "...write to your grand mother and tell her that your mother is not to blame but it was the raising she gave her lying son....[*sic*]"[72]

California had not provided a panacea to Ellen's financial woes, and shortly after she arrived she remarked, "I am getting tired of here already it costs to live here. . . .they want nearly as mutch interest as we pay their. . .I never want to come to frisco for meny years after I go back for it is the most stingey hole I ever was in. [*sic*]"[73] All hope eroded for economic success in California, Ellen returned to Fairbanks during the summer of 1906 to tend to her business, her last hope for independence. As usual, Will had no money for his passage and deferred all travel arrangements to Ellen.

In January 1907, Ellen, usually upbeat and optimistic, lamented that she had "no good news to tell."[74] The Fairbanks Banking Company had sent to San Francisco for her jewelry, pawned there for her and Will's passage back to Alaska, and she filed a law suit against Edward Condon for failure to turn over rent money due her. While handling these matters a disgusted San Francisco boarding house operator demanded payment of Ellen's bill accrued during her stay. Ellen tried to negotiate a special rate for herself, which elicited an irate response. Not only did the manager feel her charges were fair, she believed she had saved face for Ellen by providing Will with a room alone when all other

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[71]Ibid., Ellen Gibson to Tom Gibson, April 22, 1906, Box 2, Folder 176.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Ibid., November 24, 1905, Box 2, Folder 150.

[74]Ibid., Ellen Gibson to Mrs. DeForest, January 28, 1907, Box 3, Folder 200.

men had to double up. Indignantly the proprietess asked, "what did I do it for. so as to hide your disgrase. dont think for a moment that I was blind for he was seen coming out of your room in the Mornings. did I not warn you to be carfull. [*sic*]"[75] As Ellen attempted to deal with these matters, a persistent health problem was diagnosed as cervical cancer. Unable to treat her advanced symptoms, Fairbanks physician Dr. Sutherland advised surgery in Seattle.[76]

In September 1907, Ellen got her business affairs in order, rented out all of her cabins and readied to leave. Convinced treatment would be successful Ellen expected to remain Outside for four to five months, recuperate at Harrison Hot Springs and return to Fairbanks the following spring. At the time of her departure Will was out at his mine, and as usual Tom assumed responsibility for his mother's welfare. Ellen's biggest concern was that he pay her debts as money became available, and Tom's was that Will Butler would be a meddlesome bother. From his hunting camp on Fairbanks Creek Tom wrote, "now you know if any thing is left for Bill to see too I will through up the whole thing. Now this is final with me as you know I don't like him. [*sic*]"[77] After arranging for a ten dollar per month allowance for Will, Ellen gave major responsibility to two attorneys before she left on the *Lavelle Young* in mid-September.

In Seattle Ellen underwent surgery, after which instead of resting she worried. She fretted that her divorce was unsettled and fussed because the law suit against Condon dragged. And as always, money worries nagged at her. In spite of her concerns and slow recovery, Ellen filled her hours in bed writing to friends in Fairbanks and enjoying their

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[75]Ibid., Mrs. John R. Hatter to Ellen Gibson, June 3, 1907, Box 3, Folder 215.

[76]Ibid., J. A. Sutherland, M.D. to Tom Gibson, n.d., Box 3, Folder 225.

[77]Ibid., Tom Gibson to Ellen Gibson, September 3, 1907, Box 3, Folder 227.

responses. A letter from Goldie Keeler, the young daughter of one of Ellen's friends, was particularly nostalgic. "I wish you were here," she scrawled in her elementary hand writing, "the house looks lonesome with out you."[78] As if wishing would make it happen, Goldie concluded her letter with the prophesy, "I can shut my eyes and see you coming with all the pretty things in the spring."[79] But, as Ellen knew, dreams do not always become reality.

In January Ellen received a terminal diagnosis. Her sister, Mary Jane Bell of Vancouver, and Tom rushed to her bedside, intent on making her as comfortable as possible. Reduced to skin and bone Ellen finally admitted she had a "hard fite for my life and don't know if I will win or not. [*sic*]"[80] Will, unable to get together the money to make a trip to Seattle, attempted to comfort Ellen through the mail with the assurance that if she did not recover she need not worry, "for I will do anything to please you and I promise you that although your sons and I can[']t get along together that for your sake alone I will not start any trouble."[81] With a photograph of her favorite dog, Dandy, on the bedside table, and her son and sister by her side, Ellen Gibson, in her late forties, died on Saturday, May 17, 1908.[82] She was buried in a Seattle cemetery. As he had promised, Will Butler was amicable and deeded most of the partnership holdings to Tom and Elmer.[83]

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[78]Ibid., Goldie Keeler to Ellen Gibson, January 12, 1908, Box 4, Folder 277.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Ibid., Ellen Gibson to Tom and Elmer Gibson, January 15, 1908, Box 4, Folder 281.

[81]Ibid., Will Butler to Ellen Gibson, January 12, 1908, Box 4, Folder 278.

[82]"Mrs. Ellen Gibson Dead." *Fairbanks Daily Times*, May 20, 1908.

[83]Quit Claim Deed from William Butler to Thomas H. Gibson, August 19, 1910, SEGC, Box 6, Folder 435.

Still unable to settle down, Elmer moved Outside shortly after his mother's death. In California he learned the blacksmith trade, then moved to Nevada to put his skills to use. In 1909, while riding a horse at a fair in Elko, he was thrown and trampled. Serious injuries required several surgeries, but Elmer never regained his strength. Word filtered back to Tom in Fairbanks in 1911 that Elmer had died.[84]

Will Butler continued to live in the Fairbanks area until 1909, when he moved his mining operation to Little Creek near Ophir City in southwest Alaska.[85] It is unclear whether or not Ellen and Joe were ever granted a divorce. Joe was last known to be living in San Francisco.

On January 14, 1910, Tom married a Fairbanks woman to whom he was devoted for over fifty years. He supported his family in various business enterprises related to his meat market, automobile repair and boat building.

When Ellen Gibson came north in 1898 her only assets were a sewing machine and laundry equipment with which to make her way, borrowed money and a passion to gain financial security. She was a relentless believer that her business schemes would work, but, always short of money, escape from the disappointment of failed ventures and personal relationships became a pattern that offered the promise of a more inspired life and refuge from the past. Unmistakable tension permeated Ellen's fiercely independent life, but the power of love and hope made her believe in her men and strive for a dream. Physical illness deflated her spirit, but only death ended her restless search for an illusive dream that she always believed could become reality.

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[84]Ibid., Mary Jane Bell to Tom Gibson, May 1, 1911, Box 4, Folder 360.

[85]*Alaska-Yukon Gazetteers*, Computerized Data Base. Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 189.

Chapter Three

Jessie Spiro Bloom
1887-1980

There was a sense of quiet and peace
in the Interior of Alaska around Fairbanks in those days,
we truly were isolated, and were dependent on each other
and on our own inward resources for our
entertainment and spiritual comfort.[1]

Early on a July morning in 1912 Jessie Bloom first saw Fairbanks from the deck of a sternwheeler on the Chena River. The boat's "whistle blew, the dogs took up the cry, and we were at the dock," Jessie later recorded.[2] After introductions to the townspeople who customarily gathered to greet the steamer, Bob, Jessie's husband of two months, led her to his general store a block away, which she described as a jumble of guns and trapper's supplies. An hour later, the Blooms walked to the Tanana Bakery on Second Avenue for breakfast. Mrs. Driscoll, the proprietess, brewed Jessie "a special pot of tea...while Bob took his coffee."[3] Years later Jessie believed that maintaining their individuality in such ways contributed to the success of their sixty-two year marriage.

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[1]Jessie Bloom, "Watching Alaska Grow, The Personal Recollections of a Pioneer," Unpublished Manuscript, 1951, AJAC, (see chap. 1, n. 55), Box 4, Folder 43, 56.

[2]Jessie Bloom, 1974 Memoir, AJAC, Box 3, Folder 36, 48.

[3]Ibid.

Thus began Jessie's life in Alaska: a life of hope for a frontier community; a life of tradition—and always, the dream for a permanent home.

Of Lithuanian Jewish stock, Bob and Jessie were raised by parents who had immigrated to Dublin, Ireland, in the early 1880s. When Nicholas I ascended to the throne of Russia in 1825, Jews lived in autonomous communities governing themselves by their own civil, criminal and ritual laws. Thirty years later Russian politics had intruded into Jewish society and "transformed the very foundations of Russian-Jewish life."[4] Oppressive Tsarist legislation and severe conscription policy intensified the government's movement to assimilate all Jews into mainstream Russian culture. Many were forced out of positions they had already achieved which halted their progress and resulted in diminished economic prospects. Jews realized that if they intended to maintain their identity they must "cease their efforts to adapt themselves to the larger environment and to create instead a new one outside of Russia."[5] Bob and Jessie's parents were among the 2.5 million eastern European Jewish emigrants who settled in western Europe beginning in 1880 in search of religious freedom and economic opportunity.

Born in Shavli, Kovno, Lithuania, on October 15, 1878, Bob was a young boy when he came to Dublin, and even in later years Jessie said he was "almost as Irish as 'Paddy's pig.' "[6] In 1897 Bob immigrated to Seattle where he worked and lived with his

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[4]Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia, 1825 - 1855* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 185.

[5]Steven J. Zipperstein, "Judaism in the Western Hemisphere," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987, 193.

[6]Jessie Bloom to Jacob R. Marcus, September 30, 1962. Robert and Jessie Bloom Papers (hereafter RJBP), Box 5, Folder 42, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

uncle Semach who had previously come to America.[7] A year later he "got bitten with the gold bug" and walked over the Chilkoot Pass into Dawson, where he half-heartedly mined until 1904 when he joined the rush to Interior Alaska.[8] In Fairbanks he alternately prospected and peddled until he admitted that the latter was more lucrative, and he opened a general store. Although Bob did not expect his business or the community to endure beyond the life of a placer mining camp, Fairbanks fooled him because by 1912 there were stampedes to other camps, and Fairbanks became the supply center. Jessie proudly recalled that, "he built up a reputation for honesty and integrity that was part of the growth of Fairbanks, always feeling that the camp's potential was limitless—he was a dreamer," and he emerged a successful businessman and a dedicated community leader.[9]

Jessie Spiro was born on December 21, 1887, in Dublin, where she grew up with a sister and two brothers in a comfortable middle-class home on the banks of the Grand Canal. Her childhood days were spent watching horse-drawn barges carrying loads of turf on the canal and enjoying the pageantry of the red-coated garrison sentries from a nearby Army barracks marching in their Sunday afternoon parades. Visits to museums, art galleries and the botanical and zoological gardens were frequent weekend outings. Jessie's mother had great respect for books and initiated a family tradition that allowed each child at age twelve a card at the public library. Mrs. Spiro supervised the ceremonial acquisition of the card and the choice of reading material until the child had read particular selections from the British classics. Once achieved, the children were free to select their own

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[7]Matthew J. Eisenberg, "The Last Frontier: Jewish Pioneers in Alaska" (Ordination thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1991) AJAC, Box 6, Folder 59, 104.

[8]Jessie Bloom to Jacob R. Marcus, September 30, 1962, RJBP, Box 5, Folder 42.

[9]Jessie Bloom, "Fairbanks and the Ten Year Resurrection." Unpublished monograph, AJAC, Box 3, Folder 23, n.p.n.

reading materials. Access to these cultural and educational institutions "seemed to be something that Mother never tired of reminding us of as part of our blessings," Jessie later recalled.[10]

Jessie's mother helped found the Dublin Hebrew Ladies' Charitable Society, an organization designed to aid the large number of less fortunate Jewish immigrants who were taking refuge in Dublin. The children of members were expected to help by running errands and delivering messages, and in this way, Jessie said, "we learned to take our part in the community in the easy way, just drifting into it, because it was the thing to do."[11]

Jessie's formal education began at the predominantly Protestant St. Peter's School. This was a "period of rather strict discipline, which I feel may have influenced my outlook in later years, because we did have some self-discipline as we grew older."[12] Her fourth grade teacher was "an old maid [who] seemed to be very frustrated, and took her ire out on her pupils. I seemed to come in for a particular share of her wrath."[13] Jessie speculated, however, that

> the freedom we had in the home, made it difficult for us to fall in line with the stricter attitude in school. At home we were permitted to take part in any conversation that took place at the table, and in other ways were treated as personalities. There was no lack of discipline in the home, but both Mother and Father appreciated our individualities. We did not have

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[10]Jessie Bloom. Untitled monograph. AJAC. Box 3. Folder 37. 5.

[11]Ibid.. 6.

[12]Jessie Bloom. "Watching Alaska Grow: The Personal Recollections of a Pioneer." AJAC. 10.

[13]Ibid.

that atmosphere so common at that time, that children should be seen and not heard.[14]

When Jessie was ten years old she was diagnosed with St. Vitas Dance, a nervous disorder characterized by involuntary uncontrollable movements of the body and limbs. This illness put Jessie in the Meath Hospital for almost three months followed by a lengthy recuperation at home. At this time the Dublin schools initiated a strong campaign against the use of alcohol. Because "among the Jewish population drunkenness was almost unheard of," Jessie thought it unnecessary to force the children to take a pledge against drinking.[15] Nevertheless, the temperance message that alcohol "was the devil himself that was in the bottle" caused Jessie to reject her doctor's prescription of "a little whiskey to help stimulate my appetite."[16] Even though the rector of her school encouraged Jessie to follow medical orders, she refused to break her pledge against consuming intoxicating liquor. Jessie's reputation as a strong-willed individual was already well established.

In October 1899 Jessie was physically able to return to school, and she attended classes at Central Model School, larger and more cosmopolitan than St. Peter's. An hour of religious instruction was offered early in the morning. However, students of less well-represented denominations or non-Christian faiths were excused. Instead, these children assembled in "the classroom assigned to the 'No religion' as we were jokingly called" for a study period.[17] Ignoring the rule for quiet, these students, representative of different religions and cultures, generally spent the time visiting and becoming better acquainted. "I

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[14]Ibid., 11.

[15]Ibid., 12.

[16]Ibid., 13.

[17]Ibid., 15.

think that was an ideal setting for instilling a feeling of tolerance for the other fellow's beliefs," Jessie later reflected.[18]

The Jewish faith was an integral part of the Spiro home, and even though the Christian religion predominated in Dublin, Jessie never felt discriminated against or isolated because of her beliefs. Her parents taught that all religions should be respected but that Jewish traditions should be upheld.

> Hanukkah in our family was very much of a family holiday. We never went in for parties or extra company, just kept it among ourselves. Naturally there was a lot of Christmas spirit around us, and we were carefully explained [*sic*] that we had no reason to celebrate Christmas, but that by concentrating on Hanukkah we could retain our dignity, not by copying our Christian neighbors and having plum pudding or turkey.[19]

Regardless, she had a youthful need for acceptance, and attendance at the annual Hanukkah play, which was traditionally held on a Sunday afternoon, allowed Jessie to feel a unity with her neighbors who observed the Christian Sabbath.

As a teenager, relationships with young men caused humiliation when Jessie was "strictly cautioned not to get too friendly with the Gentile boys."[20] Since many of these "nice lads" had been friends from childhood it was difficult to accept the new rule to limit her associations with them, but, Jessie remembered, "it seems that each time we went out,

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[18]Ibid., 16.

[19]Ibid., 36.

[20]Ibid., 41.

or even talked to a Gentile lad, after we had grown up, there was an accompanying sense of guilt, which as we grew older did not seem at all worth the effort, so we cut it out."[21]

Jessie finished school at the age of fifteen and went to work for her father in his printing office, where she stayed for six years. In April 1909 her brother Abram, who was working in London, invited Jessie to come for a visit, and while there he suggested that she take a secretarial course and then find a job. She welcomed that challenge, and at the end of the six months of training accepted a position with Cooper Hewitt, Co., a firm promoting mercury vapor lights, which she enjoyed until she learned that women in the firm earned half as much as the men.[22] Concerned about equality, Jessie joined the Women's Freedom League, a conservative suffrage organization. "It took some courage to announce oneself as a suffragette, and much more to take an active part in the campaign," but her commitment to equal rights for women gave her the strength.[23] "I realized that our absolute faith in the movement was so strong that we felt the world could not progress in any manner unless women were given equal rights."[24] Jessie became intensely devoted to the cause and attended meetings every evening which did not end until almost ten o'clock. Although she had to be in her office at nine the following mornings, she found the work so "stimulating and worthwhile" that she did not object to the busy schedule.[25] On one occasion Jessie helped organize a march in Hyde Park that her mother felt had the potential to turn into a riot. Mrs. Spiro, fearing for her daughter's

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[21]Ibid.

[22]Jessie Bloom. 1974 Manuscript, AJAC, 19-20.

[23]Ibid., 42.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid., 43.

safety, asked that she not participate, and Jessie complied. Later, recalling that incident, her mother remarked to Bob that, "Jessie may have strong ideas, but I've found that you will be able to reason with her."[26] Years later Jessie reflected that:

> The work we did on the platform was to be of great benefit to me in my life in Alaska, as the first bill passed by the Alaska Territorial Legislature, when they got Home Rule in 1912-13, at their first Session, was one granting the women of Alaska equal rights with men. I was thrilled when I heard about it, and though some of the men in Bob's store scoffed at it, remarking that it was just a gag to make it seem that the population was greater than it really was, still that did not dampen my ardor, nor my pleasure in the knowledge that I had come to a country full of opportunity, and had changed from a Subject of King George, to a full fledged citizen of a flourishing democracy.[27]

On Christmas Eve, 1910, Bob Bloom arrived in London from Fairbanks to help settle the estate of his brother, Zelick, who had died a month earlier. While there he and Jessie, who were second cousins, became reacquainted. With Jessie's brother they made a trip to Dublin to visit family, and after a couple of months Bob proposed marriage. Even before she accepted she gave notice in her office, treated her co-workers to an evening at the theater, cleaned out her desk, and returned to Dublin. There Jessie and Bob shared their decision to marry with family and friends, but because Bob needed to return to Alaska to tend to business and was not prepared to arrive with a wife, he suggested that Jessie remain in Dublin for a year after which he would return for her and they would

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[26]Ibid., 13.

[27]Jessie Bloom, "Watching Alaska Grow. The Personal Recollections of a Pioneer." AJAC, 48.

marry. One of Bob's motives was for Jessie to learn how to cook and keep house. To facilitate this, he offered to provide Jessie with an allowance so that she did not need to work or rely on her father. Her "flabbergasted" friends nicknamed her the "kept woman."[28] For the next sixteen months Jessie enjoyed taking walks, attending the theater and concerts, and presumably she learned domestic skills. Although it would appear she had the time, Jessie did not actively participate in the Dublin Suffrage movement. Instead, time with her mother became a cherished memory. "It was during that period that I was able to talk to Mother as an adult and learn more about her background...and best of all of course was the fact that Bob belonged to the same background."[29]

Bob returned to Dublin a year later, and on the seventeenth of May 1912 he and Jessie were married in a private Jewish ceremony. On the first of June, with trunks of Irish linens and English silver, Jessie and Bob left the British Isles bound for Alaska. After a leisurely trip across the United States visiting friends and relatives who had previously emigrated from Dublin, they boarded the steamer *Dolphin* in Seattle on the Fourth of July and sailed north amid a display of fireworks that lit up the city like a "fairyland." As the landscape faded Bob and Jessie relaxed.

> Bob was tired and went to our stateroom...I did not want to talk to anyone. I wanted time to myself. I stood near the lifeboats in a secluded part to watch the scenery in the long summer twilight. I know I prayed. I know I was homesick, and I know I had a serious talk to myself, and then I looked

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[28]Jessie Bloom, 1974 Manuscript, AJAC, 26.

[29]Ibid., 26-27.

up and there were the mountains in all their majesty. I knew I was blessed.[30]

On the voyage up the Inland Passage Jessie met Lena Morrow Lewis,[31] a Socialist Party organizer and the first woman elected to the party's National Executive Committee.[32] In Alaska to garner support of the working class for the fall elections, Lena conversed with Jessie about suffrage and temperance. Although together for only one day and despite Jessie's rejection of formal membership in the Socialist Party, the two women became life-long friends.[33] Periodically over the years Jessie contributed money to Lena's endeavors.[34] To the four daughters Jessie would later have, "Auntie Lena" became a special friend who sent gifts and letters as she traveled in support of social and political causes. Meta Bloom Buttnick remembered that Lena's "letters used to come in envelopes from different hotels in different cities so, as she said, we could follow her across the country."[35]

When the ship reached Skagway Jessie and Bob traveled by White Pass and Yukon Railway to Whitehorse, where they boarded a steamer for Tanana. The week-long journey down the Yukon River in midsummer was an exciting and romantic experience for

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[30]Jessie Bloom, 1974 Manuscript, AJAC, 26.

[31]Ibid., 43.

[32]Joseph Sullivan, "Sourdough Radicalism: Labor and Socialism in Alaska, 1905-1920," *Alaska History*, 7, no. 1 (1992): 6.

[33]Meta Bloom Buttnick to author, February 7, 1996.

[34]Jessie Bloom to Lena Morrow Lewis, November 9, 1949, Lena Morrow Lewis Collection, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

[35]Meta Bloom Buttnick to author, February 7, 1996.

Jessie. "We stopped several times each day at wood camps or fish camps or regular settlements—the continuous daylight made it appear like one lazy summer day; no routine about resting or eating, just catch as can and go as you please."[36] On the nineteenth of July at 5:30 in the morning Jessie caught her first glimpse of Fairbanks as the steamer maneuvered to the dock. After breakfast and a visit to his store, Bob took Jessie to a small frame house on Third Avenue, and proudly announced, "This is ours!"[37] Jessie looked around the two small rooms and declared "it felt like HOME!"[38] The next morning Bob was awakened at six o'clock when the Northern Commercial Company whistle blew. He got the stove going and called, " 'Get up Jessie. I have the kettle boiling. I know that a white man can't talk to you until you have a pot of tea.' "[39] Jessie recalled, "We were acting like old married people."[40]

That day Jessie had her first social caller, Ruth Conditt, wife of the Presbyterian minister, who invited Jessie to participate in the Presbyterian Ladies' Aid Society. Mabel Moore stopped in and suggested they take a walk, a daily practice that Jessie adopted, and in the afternoon Jessie was invited to join some other women for tea. Her introduction to Fairbanks social life was warm and spontaneous, and Jessie genuinely felt welcomed.

Although Jessie had spent the previous year learning domestic skills, she discovered early that housekeeping in Alaska was quite different from in Dublin. Bob showed her how to use the wood stove for cooking and explained that old potatoes that

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[36]Jessie Bloom. 1974 Memoir. AJAC. 44-45.

[37]Ibid., 49.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid., 50.

[40]Ibid.

had sprouted could still be used after "taking the whiskers off."[41] One day a neighbor woman, with gun in hand, stopped by to explain that none of the meat at the butcher's shop looked appealing so she was going down by the river to shoot some ptarmigan for dinner. Quickly Jessie learned that procuring food in Fairbanks was a unique experience.

One of the first social functions that Jessie attended was the Presbyterian Sunday School Picnic. While eating their lunch, a little girl came running up to announce that her friend had brought an egg that the chicken had laid. "I was still too recent an arrival from the Outside to be impressed by 'an egg the chicken laid,' but I was soon to find out."[42] Eggs were brought in on the last river boat in the fall, and as the seasons changed so did the eggs, until by spring they had a very strong taste. The resourceful women had developed ways to use these eggs without affecting the taste of the food they prepared. Spice cake was a favorite baked good because the cook could disguise the strong taste of the eggs by doubling the amount of spices called for in the recipe. Bob was partial to ginger bread, and Jessie discovered that increasing the spice completely covered the egg taste, and "perhaps better still, have it blend with the regular recipe in such a way that it gave the ginger bread a distinctive taste."[43]

Jessie also learned methods of food storage that were foreign to her. Staple foods such as flour, sugar, coffee, shortening, and "the Alaska cow," as evaporated milk was called, were ordered a year in advance.[44] At first it seemed a complicated task to

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[41]Ibid.

[42]Jessie Bloom, "Fairbanks To-Day, Yesterday and the Day Before," unpublished monograph, September 6, 1949, RJBP, Box 5, Folder 32, 1.

[43]Ibid., p. 2.

[44]Ibid., 6.

determine how much of what kinds of things would be needed, but Jessie quickly got the system under control and enjoyed the fact that this method of stocking up practically eliminated the complications of shopping. Jessie's back porch became the winter-time freezer; the basement, a root cellar and storage place for the bottled fruits and vegetables that she put up at fall harvest time. Large quantities of pies and breads were frozen and stored on the back porch, and salmon bellies were pickled and stored in a crock. Moose, sheep and ptarmigan provided most of the meat, and her first winter Jessie learned that seeds were started at the end of February in southern exposure windows so that by late May plants were ready to set out in the garden. One year the fall harvest yielded more carrots than Jessie could store in her root cellar, and carrot pudding was the solution. "That winter my desert problem was solved. All I had to do was to break off a chunk of a carrot pudding, and put it in the double boiler early in the morning" where it gradually steamed until ready to be served.[45]

The opening of the Alaska railroad from Seward to Fairbanks in 1923 changed how Fairbanks dealt with its food needs, and Jessie considered it a "luxury beyond the wildest dreams" to be able to get fresh produce in the grocery store only ten days out of Seattle.[46] Although Jessie appreciated the conveniences that improved transportation made, she was not always eager to adapt to other changes that were offered, and the electric cooking stove was the most difficult modern convenience for Jessie to accept.

With all its time-saving gadgets, the electric appliance could not compare to a wood stove that allowed you to keep a pot of water simmering ready for tea and humidify your house in winter. Food cooked on the wood stove could be started in the morning,

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[45]Ibid., 4.

[46]Ibid., 9.

and this slow-cooking method filled the house with a pleasant aroma and allowed the cook to take advantage of cheaper and tougher cuts of meat. In addition, the wood stove was the rubbish burner, kept flat irons hot for use whenever needed and helped warm the house. For Jessie, her wood stove's "live" heat gave "a feeling of what home should be."[47]

During a 1976 interview Erica Gottfried asked Jessie if life had been hard in early Fairbanks. "No, it wasn't very hard," Jessie responded. "First of all, Bob didn't expect much and he was very, very helpful. He was helpful with the baby and he was helpful with the housekeeping."[48] Jessie further noted that Fairbanks was a place where people did what ever needed doing regardless of preconceived gender roles. She recalled one incident when a woman who had just finished scrubbing the Masonic Hall floor showed Jessie the seventy-five dollar dress she planned to wear to that night's dance. At first Jessie questioned what kind of place was Fairbanks if women get down on their hands and knees to scrub floors, then buy expensive dresses. Certainly this was a different set of values that she was used to, but the experience was a good introduction to the less structured frontier.[49]

In the spring of 1913, before Jessie had been in Fairbanks a year, she gave birth to a daughter named Meta for Bob's grandmother. Dissatisfied with a male doctor she had visited in early pregnancy, Jessie sought out Aline Bradley, the only woman doctor in town, to deliver her. Meta was born April 5 at St. Matthew's Episcopal Mission Hospital, and two days later the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* announced her arrival on the front

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[47]Jessie Bloom. "Answer to a Plea for a Honest Picture of Life in the Interior of Alaska." 1945. unpublished monograph. RJBP. Box 5. Folder 30. 6.

[48]Jessie Bloom to Erica Gottfried. February 26, 1976. Oral History Collection. Manuscripts and University Archives Division. Allan Library. University of Washington. Seattle. Washington. Tape #2.

[49]Ibid.

page.[50] The following Sunday the Episcopal Church choir came in to sing hymns, and Jessie commented to the Rector that she "liked the idea of my little Episcopalian Jewess being greeted by music so early after her arrival."[51] Shortly after the birth of her first child, Jessie was pregnant again, but at Bob's insistence she made arrangements to go to Dublin for this child's birth. Before departing, however, Jessie had the opportunity to participate in one of Fairbanks' greatest celebrations.

Fairbanksans never missed a chance to have a party, and the impending passage of the Alaska Railroad Bill in February 1914 provided good reason to celebrate. Spirits were high, thinking that almost fifty years after the purchase of Alaska from the Russians year-round transportation into the Interior was imminent. In anticipation of the growth and development that was surely to come, the Fraternal Order of Eagles arranged for a "Hard Times" ball to be held on Friday, February 13. Dress for the occasion, that the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* predicted would be "one of the grandest events of the Fairbanks social season," was restricted to overalls, calico gowns, and rags. "White collars and dress suits are absolutely barred," the newspaper warned.[52] To encourage appropriate costumes, the Eagles offered prizes to the poorest dressed man and woman in attendance. W. F. Thomspon, editor of the *News-Miner*, predicted the bill would pass in Congress, which would insure the expenditure of $40,000,000 in the territory. He urged community spirit by suggesting:

> Let's spend a portion of that $40,000,000 in advance. It is guaranteed by the United States government and is sure to come to us, and the bulk of it

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[50]"Girl Is Born To The Blooms," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, April 7, 1913.

[51]Jessie Bloom, 1974 Memoir, AJAC, 56.

[52]"Big Dance Is Coming Friday," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, February 9, 1914.

> will be paid out through the First National Bank of this city. We can collect in good time, even though we are compelled to use strong-arm methods. Let's celebrate![53]

On February 18, inch high headlines in the newspaper informed readers that "BILL PASSES" by a vote of 230 to 87. An advertisement announced that James Wickersham, Alaska's delegate to Congress, was celebrating that evening at The Washington Hotel and the community was invited to join him and express their gratitude for his hard work that secured the passage of the bill. When the N. C. Company whistle blew, signaling passage of the bill, "hats began to fly in the air and flags began to appear at the windows of the offices and in front of the business houses."[54] One resident was so excited about the event that he "raised the electric lighted picture of Delegate Wickersham to the top of his flag staff."[55] Wickersham was sure that a railroad would improve the sagging economy, and Fairbanks civic and social organizations echoed his sentiments and immediately pledged money in support of the grand celebration which Thompson predicted would last a week or longer. Half-fare train rides in from the creeks were offered to encourage participation.

Plans complete, the celebration began at noon Monday, February 23, with a parade through the downtown streets, and an evening torch light parade was followed by a masked ball at the Eagles Hall. The *News-Miner* encouraged everyone "to get all of the confetti obtainable and to make as much noise as is possible as horns and other noisemakers are to be had cheap."[56] Specially appointed deputies were in place to

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[53]Ibid., "Let's Celebrate," February 11, 1914.

[54]Ibid., "Fairbanksans Celebrating," February 19, 1914.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid., "City Is Preparing For A Great Celebration," February 21, 1914.

maintain order, but Thompson assured celebrants that "they will in no way effect [*sic*] the hilarity and feeling of good fellowship which is sure to prevail, being appointed only for the purpose of preventing absolutely lawless acts."[57] To heighten the excitement, Gordon's Store advertised a special $50 rate for a round trip ticket on the "First Big Railroad Excursion, Sept. 2, 1916," and private businesses, school and government offices announced they would close at noon on Monday.[58] Anticipating a large number of advertisers, Thompson urged businesses to get their ad copy in early because "there are four able-bodied celebrators in the *News-Miner* office" who want to participate in the festivities.[59] By all accounts, the celebration surpassed expectations.

The day after the party, Thomspon wrote what must have been his most subdued and shortest ever editorial. He stated simply that,

> last night's celebration was SOME celebration. When we look around our office and see one sober man attempting to get out a newspaper all by himself, we realize that the *News-Miner* bunch must have celebrated with the re[s]t of them....For the sins of omission and commission in this issue, good people, forgive us! However, the way we feel about it just now, we don't give a hang whether you forgive us or not.[60]

For all the fanfare and apparent fun had in connection with the passage of the Railroad Bill, Jessie Bloom remembered a sober side in the aftermath. During the partying, the town was thrown wide open, and because everyone was in masquerade

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[57]Ibid.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid., "Now Come The Fireworks."

[60]Ibid., "The Celebration," February 24, 1914.

people were disguised. This allowed women to enter bars and walk "The Row," two areas of town ordinarily off limits to them. Because the celebrating went on into the night, husbands and wives with children took turns staying home and attending the festivities. With all the drinking and the freedom offered by the masks some people engaged in behavior that they probably would not consider under more scrutinized conditions. When recalling this event, Jessie remarked that "the 'Girls' [from the Row] were in the masquerade also, and from reports that subsequently came in, they were the most ladylike of all those who took part in the dancing and general merrymaking."[61] A few days later when people realized how much money they had spent and how foolishly they had acted, many decided to take action to prevent any similar celebration from occurring in Fairbanks. Some of the women "who had imbibed not wisely but too well" organized themselves into the "Fourth Division Drys," the organization that was instrumental in the passage of the Temperance laws two years later.[62] The town's commitment to more subdued celebration apparently was sincere. It was not until Thanksgiving 1918 that Fairbanks turned out for such a wild time when a community dance was advertised as "the biggest Masquerade since the Railroad Ball."[63]

As soon as the confetti settled, the women of Fairbanks organized themselves to address their responsibility as voters and to organize the Women's Civic Club. Because there had been little debate regarding the passage of the woman suffrage bill by the Alaska Territorial Legislature, many women felt unfamiliar with how local politics worked and what the issues were for the next election. The Civic Club provided an educational forum

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[61] Jessie Bloom, 1974 Memoir, AJAC, 74.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Advertisement, *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, November 16, 1918.

and allowed the women jointly to put in nomination the name of the first women to run for elected office.[64] Nominated for Clerk of School Board was Anna Zimmerman, an educator who had graduated from Blackburn College in Illinois and done graduate work at the University of Chicago and Bryn Mawr, who had come to Fairbanks in 1908 with her mining engineer husband, John. The Civic Club believed they had made a good choice, and the voters elected her to serve for several terms.[65]

In July 1914, Jessie and fourteen month old Meta traveled to Ireland to await the birth of the Blooms' second child. On December 6, as the Germans bombed the British Port of Yarmouth, Deborah Bloom was born and named for Jessie's grandmother. The next two years were "a time of deep despair to many people in Ireland."[66] Some Irish wanted Home Rule which would have allowed the country to remain part of Britain but with its own Parliament and domestic autonomy. The British Parliament passed the Home Rule Bill in 1914, but the outbreak of the first World War prevented it from taking effect. An extreme nationalist faction, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, formed in favor of complete independence for an Irish republic. This force opposed Britain's idea to draft young Irish men into military service, and by 1916 the disagreement had peaked and the Irish Republicans staged the Easter Monday Rebellion in an effort to establish their own provisional government. The rebellion was doomed to fail before it started due to the inadequate strength of the Irish forces, and Jessie could not sympathize with the Republicans, whom, she believed "were holding on to a grievance of a couple of hundred

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[64]Jessie Bloom, "Contrasts," Unpublished Monograph, RJBP, Box 5, Folder 31, 2-3.

[65]Mary Zimmerman Woods, "A brief sketch of Anna Mary Horine Zimmerman for Alaska Friends, [*sic*]" Unpublished Monograph, RJBP, Box 5, Folder 39.

[66]Jessie Bloom, 1974 Memoir, AJAC, 67.

years."[67] Although the Easter Monday Rebellion ultimately led to Irish independence, historian Joe McCarthy has written that at the time most of Ireland agreed with Jessie, and viewed the destruction and bloodshed with glum indifference or irritation, "regarding the whole performance as a reckless and unnecessary outburst by a few hotheaded political fanatics."[68] Jessie resented the "bedlam" caused by the rebellion. Conversation was guarded, people were forced to remain indoors to avoid sniper fire, and homes were searched by the British at gun point. She was relieved to leave Dublin in June 1916, after two years, for her return to America.

The journey on board the *New York* from Liverpool to the United States was tense due to the hostilities of war torn Europe. Jessie feared floating mines, and even though the passengers had been assured that the ship's American flag guarded them from attack, Jessie was ill at ease. For the first several nights she sat in the cabin, fully clothed and ever alert, watching her two children sleep. In New York Jessie and the girls were met by friends with whom they planned to spend a couple of weeks in Connecticut. Jessie finally relaxed for the first time since beginning the journey. However, her visit was cut short by a scare of infantile paralysis.[69] Jessie quickly made ready to leave the east coast for Seattle and her trip back to Alaska. It was welcome relief to board the Alaska Steamship vessel which headed north. "The moment I came aboard friends from Fairbanks and those going there identified themselves and we immediately became good company."[70]

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[67]Ibid., 70-71.

[68]Joe McCarthy, *Ireland* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1964), 63.

[69]Jessie Bloom, 1974 Memoir, AJAC, 78.

[70]Ibid.

Due to extended delays during her trip from Europe, Jessie found herself in Dawson almost out of money. When she received word that she would have to remain for ten days longer than she expected, she went to the Northern Commercial Company to seek assistance. When she introduced herself as Bob Bloom's wife, all the manager asked was, "how much do you need?"[71] In August Jessie and the girls were met at the dock by Bob as they returned home to Fairbanks. This was the first of many nostalgic returns to Alaska, and Jessie remarked that she always had a feeling of "coming home" when she stepped back on Alaskan soil.[72]

Years later Deborah's birth place caused jealousy among the Bloom girls. In 1923 when Fairbanks celebrated the opening of the railroad from Seward to the Interior, a float ridden by the Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden North, the organization created to recognize children of pioneers who were born in the north, was part of a large parade. Because Deborah was ineligible for membership, she watched dejectedly as her three sisters, all born in Fairbanks, donned starched white dresses in readiness. Mournfully Debbie asked her mother, "Why did you have to go to Dublin to born me?"[73]

Bob delighted in the reunion of his family, and proudly showed them all of the home improvements that had been made during their absence. Not only did the house have a new kitchen, it had its own well and pump, a bathroom, a sink in the kitchen and running hot and cold water. It was late August and the annual grocery order, which Bob had placed, arrived. The quantity of food caused Jessie to feel a sense of gratitude for the abundance so close at hand. Contrasted to shortages she had experienced during the

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[71]Ibid., 79.

[72]Ibid.. 80.

[73]Ibid.. 100.

previous two years in Dublin, life in Alaska was one of plenty. Jessie felt indescribable joy for her family and Alaska—her home.

Grateful to be back in Fairbanks, Jessie did not object that she "had to use elbow grease" to benefit from the plenty.[74] The hard work allowed her a good night's sleep and a sense of self-satisfaction. Supplies were readily available, gardening, berry picking, and hunting provided food, and large timber resources furnished logs for homes and fuel to heat them. Families had fun together cutting ice out of the river for home refrigeration, and Jessie knew cabin fever could be avoided by taking a daily walk regardless of the weather conditions. "Even the act of getting dressed to go outdoors was a morale booster," she remembered.[75] Jessie also realized that the two years she had spent in Dublin had helped her "to grow up and to appreciate Bob," and the experience gave her the "opportunity to make a new life with him."[76]

The winter of 1916-17 sped by, and on May 28 Jessie gave birth to her third daughter, whom she named Olga after her mother.[77] The Fairbanks economy was at "low ebb" that spring caused by many men leaving for the war. Mining efforts were curtailed, and "business was practically at a standstill."[78] Managing meager resources occupied much of Jessie's time, and her social life centered around sharing money saving strategies with other women. Embroidered and hemmed flour sacks served as curtains, aprons, pillow cases and dish towels. Instead of purchasing water, barrels caught gallons of rain

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[74]Ibid., 82.

[75]Ibid.

[76]Ibid., 85.

[77]Ibid., 86.

[78]Ibid., 89.

for home use, and some residents even reused coffee grounds.[79] This climate prevailed until Jessie's fourth child, Ruth, was born September 18, 1918.

Like her own mother, Jessie took an active role in guiding the young minds of her daughters and other children. In 1918, with direction from Florence Smith Kelley, a primary school teacher, Jessie formed a small kindergarten comprised of six children. The children met daily at the Bloom home for two hours in the afternoon and learned sight-reading, paper cutting techniques, and occupied their time with other pre-school activities. To improve her knowledge and teaching skills, Jessie enrolled in a correspondence course sponsored by the Bureau of Education in Washington, D.C., which led to her certification as a kindergarten teacher in 1921.[80] To help the program, Bob procured a second-hand gramophone and records for the students' use. When Jessie realized that some of the lyrics to the songs were risqué she queried Bob about the origin of the material, and he confessed that he had bought the equipment from "one of the 'sporting girls.' "[81] Jessie admitted that overall the original owner had very good taste in music, and most of the records were integrated into her curriculum.

The settlement of Graehl was across the Chena Slough from the town of Fairbanks, and in May 1919 Jessie began taking her daughters, the kindergarten pupils, and any other children who wished to go over for picnics. Many of the prospectors, trappers and woodsmen had cabins there, and on their first trip they met Sam Jensen, who had a carpenter shop. Meta immediately recognized him as one of the men who frequented Bob's store, and Jessie accepted Sam's invitation to use his hot water or his

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[79]Jessie Bloom. "Housekeeping in Alaska, forty years ago. [*sic*]" Unpublished monograph. RJBP. Box 5. Folder 33. n.p.n.

[80]Julia Wade Abbot to Jessie Bloom. May 25. 1921. RJBP. Box 5. Folder 45.

[81]Jessie Bloom. 1974 Memoir. AJAC. 100.

stove if they had need. On future trips Sam allowed the girls to help themselves to the produce in his garden, and when he noticed how much they enjoyed picking and eating the fresh peas and carrots he offered to plant a special garden for them the following year. The girls developed a special friendship with Sam which lasted for many years.

During these outings, Jessie and the girls were intrigued with varieties of mushrooms that grew in Graehl, but they hesitated to pick any because they could not identify which ones were poisonous. In 1923 the *National Geographic Magazine* published an article about mushrooms that helped the girls make identification. Interest in gathering specimens spread to the Graehl residents, who fondly referred to this as Jessie's "mushroom project."[82] Jessie formed classes to identify and collect specimens, and she developed a recipe for pickled puffballs that found its way into the Episcopal Ladies' Guild cookbook. That year the Tanana Valley Fair provided for a mushroom exhibit, and Jessie's girls entered twenty different specimens. By 1950 the exhibit had grown to over forty.[83]

The kindergarten provided Jessie with a benefit beyond her love of children. Because additional mothers accompanied the group on outings, Jessie did not have to devote her constant attention to watching the children. One picnic in the summer of 1919 had a special advantage of freeing Jessie, even though momentarily, from day-to-day cares:

> It was way past seven and the sun was still high in the sky. I suddenly realized that there would be no night, and that I was in Alaska. I no longer was under pressure to attend to the children, the household, Bob or any

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[82]Ibid., 92.

[83]Jessie Bloom. "Watching Alaska Grow. The Personal Recollections of a Pioneer," AJAC. 65-66.

other thing. I could actually sit out in the clear pure unpolluted Alaska air and *think*....I had time to feel the wonderful closeness with the Infinite.[84]

In spite of the leisurely previous summer, the spring of 1920 was particularly difficult for Jessie. Four young children demanded most of her time and energy, and because of Bob's fear of house fires he did not want baby-sitters until the youngest daughter was old enough to take care of herself and escape in case of an emergency. Even though Bob often watched the children, Jessie was frequently house-bound. Typically, Bob left for the store at seven in the morning and did not return home until after ten at night. The store was a gathering place for the local men to share their news and discuss popular issues affecting the community and the territory; an "intellectual delicatessen" according to Jessie's close friend Mary Lee Davis.[85] When Bob returned home he was full of interesting conversation, while Jessie could only respond with a litany of child-related and domestic activities. She felt deprived of adult oriented mental stimulation and eagerly accepted Mary Lee's invitation to meet weekly, when their husbands attended Masonic Lodge meetings, to indulge in reading and discussing good books. Mary Lee, educated at Wellesley and Radcliffe, enjoyed the challenges of a successful writing career, and her background in literature added depth to the Wednesday evening study sessions that she and Jessie shared for the next three years.

The year 1923 was a turning point for Fairbanks. Now twenty years old, the community had already long outlived its projected life span, and technological advances pointed to increased longevity. The railroad began operation in 1923 when President Harding drove the "Golden Spike," and the Alaska Agricultural College, opened in 1922,

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[84]Jessie Bloom, 1974 Memoir, AJAC, 95.

[85]Ibid., 90.

was growing. Additional mining opportunities were available, and aviation had captured the entrepreneurial spirit of many pioneers. Fairbanks prospered and new residents arrived regularly when the Fairbanks Exploration Company established itself. Although Jessie was pleased with the community's growth and proud of her role in its development, she needed a break from the short days and cold temperatures of a Fairbanks winter. Because of Bob's commitments as a Regent at the college, his part ownership of the Fairbanks Aviation Company, and his own business to run, he could not leave the community. However, at his suggestion, in September 1923, Jessie and the girls boarded the train for Seward, where they met the steamer to take them to Seattle for the winter.

Once in Seattle the girls quickly settled into their routines, and Jessie found a place to live in a Jewish neighborhood which offered the children participation in synagogue activities, something they had never experienced in Fairbanks. Although Bob and Jessie taught their children the orthodox religion and the family observed all Jewish holidays, Fairbanks had only a few Jewish families and the girls had never benefited from close association with a group that shared the same heritage. It was 1939 before regular worship services were held.[86] The move Outside was also Jessie's first experience living in America outside of Alaska. Seattle's climate, lovely green trees and its proximity to the sea all reminded Jessie of Dublin. She quickly forgot the continuous struggles of life in Alaska, and memory of the work involved in preparing for freeze-up and the months of snow and cold paled in the images of lush vegetation. Life in Seattle seemed completely remote from Fairbanks, but because Bob's reputation as a well-respected businessman extended to Seattle, Jessie regularly met people with connections to Alaska who knew him.

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[86]Eisenberg, 112.

One evening while Jessie and the girls were taking a walk they saw roller skates for sale in a shop window. The girls each wanted a pair, but Jessie explained she had spent all her money at the market so the purchase would have to wait. Meta, who recognized the name of the business, remarked that she thought Bob traded with this firm. In walked Jessie with the four girls trailing behind. She introduced herself and said, "My daughter tells me that she knows that Bob has an account here. I would like to get skates for the girls."[87] Jessie and the girls left with four pairs!

Jessie had hoped that Bob would join the family for a vacation during their stay in Seattle. However, demands at home kept him in Alaska. The children enjoyed their associations, and Jessie benefited from an orthodox Jewish congregation to instill the traditional religious values in her daughters. She maintained a kosher kitchen and adhered to all religious practices and traditions. By the summer of 1925, however, Jessie felt that they should return to Fairbanks. They arrived in August after a two year absence.

Bob met his family at the train depot, and took them to their *new* home; a surprise to Jessie. It was a beautiful house with a second story, hardwood floors and a concrete basement, but Jessie "just cried!!! I was so frustrated! . . . I think what upset me most was the subconscious thought that with a home like that I would be stuck in Fairbanks indefinitely."[88] When she had finally calmed down, Bob explained that when a previous resident had left Fairbanks the mortgage to his house ended up in Bob's hand's. He hired some carpenters to dismantle it and salvage whatever they could to put into the new Bloom house a few doors away from their previous residence. Handsome windows with beveled panes and the spiral staircase came from the demolished house, and the hardwood

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[87]Ibid., 119.

[88]Ibid., 141.

floor was purchased from the old dance hall when it was torn down. Jessie had to admit that it was beautiful, and she busied herself making it into their home.

That fall Jessie organized the first Girl Scout troop in Fairbanks as an out-growth of the Sunday School at the Presbyterian Church. The girls and their parents, as well as the "whole town [were] willing and anxious to get back of our movement."[89] Activities that first winter centered around sewing, cooking and weekly hikes. While out on one hike the girls heard an airplane flying overhead. Knowing that Ben Eielson and Sir Hubert Wilkins were overdue on a flight, the girls hustled to the local airfield arriving just in time to see Eielson and Wilkins land. "Our girls were extremely proud to think that their Troop had been the first" to greet the lost aviators.[90]

By the spring of 1926 the girls had decided to organize a camp for themselves at Birch Lake, sixty miles south of Fairbanks on the Richardson Highway. To raise money, the scouts produced an amateur talent show on June 21 and profited enough to pay the transportation costs for twenty girls to attend camp that August. When the camping experience ended, Jessie filed a report to insure that their activity was registered with the Girl Scout headquarters. In answer to a question regarding their milk supply, Jessie noted that they had taken canned milk. A special note mentioned an outstanding show of the northern lights which had occurred towards the end of the camp. Some time later an article appeared in the National Girl Scout bulletin which amply noted the scouts' use of canned milk but, to Jessie's disappointment, did not mention the northern lights.

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[89]Jessie Bloom, "History of the Fairbanks Girl Scouts." Unpublished monograph. AJAC, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Microfilm #193, Roll #1, 1.

[90]Ibid.

The next winter the troop focused on singing, art and handicraft classes and hiking. During the summer the girls held their second camp at Birch Lake and began a wild flower project which was similar to the mushroom project that Jessie had initiated some years before. A tourist from Chicago donated fifty dollars for prize money to the Fair Committee "for the encouragement of the study of wild flowers of the Interior."[91] The Girl Scouts collected, classified, and mounted specimens which they exhibited at the 1929 fair, and four or five prizes in this division went to the scouts.

When word spread that Alaska had a Girl Scout troop, letters arrived periodically from Outside requesting Alaska pen pals. The girls were never interested in corresponding, however, because "the letters were usually couched in terms that plainly showed that they had such an erroneous idea of Alaska. It would have been too difficult to explain that we were white folks, lived in houses, had electric lights etc."[92]

Jessie continued to lead the Girl Scout program for the next three years. On one of her return visits to Fairbanks in the late 1960s, Jessie remarked, "Scouting has come a long way since our day."[93] By 1985, the sixtieth anniversary of the Farthest North Girl Scout Council, the scouting program in Fairbanks had grown from one troop to 112 with over one thousand registered participants.[94]

In 1928 Jessie's daughters ranged in age from ten to fifteen, and she felt it necessary to supervise their education and activities in a traditional environment. She decided to return to Dublin where she believed more opportunities existed for their

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[91]Ibid., 4.

[92]Ibid., 5.

[93]*Girl Scouts in Alaska: Spanning Six Decades. 1925 - 1985* (Fairbanks: Farthest North Girl Scout Council, 1985), n.p.n.

[94]Ibid.

decided to return to Dublin where she believed more opportunities existed for their cultural, academic, religious and social development. She did not return to Fairbanks until nine years later, feeling secure that her children were on the path to lives of educational and social achievement.

When Jessie returned to Fairbanks in 1937 it was the first time since their marriage in 1912 she and Bob were alone. Jessie hoped that Bob would sell the store and retire so they could settle permanently in Seattle, but he was reluctant to give up his business and community activities. Any consideration to Jessie's request was thwarted a few years later when, at the outbreak of World War II, Bob was asked by the Jewish Welfare Board to accept the position of lay rabbi for Interior Alaska. Without hesitation, both Bob and Jessie responded that their home would serve as a social and spiritual headquarters for Jewish GIs stationed near or traveling through Fairbanks. "The Blooms' hospitality became legendary among the Jewish servicemen," Rabbi Eisenberg wrote in his history of Jews in Alaska.[95]

In 1950 Jessie at last got her wish to leave Alaska when she and Bob bought a house on Puget Sound in Seattle. Her desires and expectations for her daughters also came to fruition: two became medical doctors; one a linguist; the other an architect. All four women married Jewish men.

Bob died on April 3, 1974, at age ninety-five, and Jessie passed away November 22, 1980, one month shy of her ninety-third birthday. Both of them are buried at Bikur Cholim-Machzikay Hadath Cemetery in Seattle.[96]

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[95]Eisenberg, 138.

[96]Ibid.. 153-4.

Jessie created a life for herself and her family in Fairbanks based on the European Orthodox Jewish faith and family traditions she experienced as a child in Dublin. Like her own mother, Jessie fostered in her four daughters a deference for learning, community service and religious observation. With this foundation, Jessie became a woman with intense pride who considered it part of her responsibility to help shape Fairbanks into a stable and productive community. Today, she is remembered as the founder of the Girl Scout program in Fairbanks and by people who knew her as a caring woman committed to nurturing her own and other children.

Jessie left an extensive written record of her life in Alaska: a life of tradition, a life of contrast. Much of her work was prepared beginning in 1951 at the request of Stanley F. Chyet and Jacob R. Marcus, archivists at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio, who encouraged Jessie to create a record of her recollections on topics ranging from day-to-day life in early Fairbanks to her reactions at being Jewish in a predominantly gentile frontier community. Jessie eagerly complied, explaining that it was a "*must* to get our Alaskan experiences on paper."[97] Ironically, as she submitted monographs and two lengthy memoirs to the repository during the subsequent fourteen years, she frequently lamented that she did not think anyone would be interested in her experiences, and she often questioned that others would find historical significance in what she considered important.

In fact, Jessie's memoirs provide an invaluable glimpse into Alaska history from a personal point of view. The overall theme of her recollections is her pride at being a pioneer in a frontier community. She was challenged and invigorated by the opportunity to participate in the making of history and to live a life that she believed released her from

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[97]Jessie Bloom to Jacob R. Marcus. November 18, 1962, RJBP, Box 5, Folder 42.

the bonds of conformity of her more sophisticated European background, even though she continually worked to instill traditional social and religious values in her family. A close reading of her work, however, indicates that as the years passed Jessie emerged as a woman no longer interested in the struggles of making a life on the frontier, favoring a more temperate climate and an organized society. For instance, by 1951 clearly she had lost her awe for old timers who had forged a life in Fairbanks and continued to reside in the community. Instead, she chided them as "never seeming to have enough ambition to go Outside."[98] For Jessie, life in Fairbanks seemed to change from one of excitement to one of frustration and endurance, and she responded by absenting herself from Alaska as often as she could. On the other hand, her husband seemed to flourish in the newness of Fairbanks, where he seized the opportunity to develop a successful business and to participate in the development of the community and the territory. Although the Blooms experienced lengthy separations, they apparently understood each other's needs. By the time Bob and Jessie celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary they had been apart for over a quarter of their married life, but they maintained a solid relationship based on love, respect and tradition.

[98]Jessie Bloom, "Watching Alaska Grow, The Personal Recollections of a Pioneer," AJAC, 56.

Chapter Four

Sarah Margaret Keenan Harrais
1872 - 1964

And now let us consider what manner of women
we shall endeavor to be,
to the end that the world may find in us
the inspirtation of which it is so sorely in need.[1]

As a young girl growing up in southeastern Ohio, Margaret Keenan dreamed of mountain vistas and the wide unfenced land of the west in the same way her Scotch-Irish ancestors had envisioned America, and when she arrived in Fairbanks in 1916 to become the superintendent of schools she was no stranger to Alaska or life on the American frontier. "I seem to have a few extra drops of pioneering blood in my veins," she recounted years later.[2] This yearning for new experience challenged Margaret to leave the familiarity of her childhood and move west in search of new adventures as a teacher first in Idaho then Alaska. Family and friends were somewhat skeptical about her move in 1914 to the southeastern Alaska town of Skagway, but it was not removed far enough from civilization to cause alarm. Her decision, however, to relocate a couple of years later to the isolated interior gold camp of Fairbanks peaked their "curiosity and deep concern

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[1]Margaret Keenan, "A Prayer For All Women," Women's Edition, *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, November 29, 1917. Margaret Keenan Harrais Collection (hereafter MKHC), Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Box 6.

[2]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," unpublished manuscript, Valdez Public Library, Valdez, Alaska, 28.

began."[3] Undaunted, her admiration for other hardy and fearless pioneers kept her focused on her goals, and instead of bending to the whims of well-meaning people who urged caution, she created a life full of experiences worth reporting in her effort to inform others of the "bigness and fineness of Alaska."[4] Half a century as an educator, leader in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), U. S. Commissioner and deputy magistrate for Alaska provided abundant raw material from which to create her vivid portraits of the north.

The next to youngest of seven children, Sarah Margaret was born to Thomas and Martha Reed Keenan on September 23, 1872, in Batesville, Ohio.[5] Raised on a large farm, Margaret's intellectual appetite was fed by her father, a Meadville College graduate who had taught school before turning to farming.[6] As a child, she eavesdropped on her father's political discussions with friends, eagerly listened to him read aloud classic literature to the entire family[7] and readily accepted his instruction in support of temperance.[8] After graduation with honors from Batesville High School in 1888 Margret taught school for several years at Bridgeport, Ohio,[9] before entering Northern Indiana

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[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., 29.

[5]Keenan family genealogy, MKHC, Box 5, Folder 5.

[6]"The County of Noble: Biographical Sketches." Caldwell County Library, Caldwell, Ohio, 133.

[7]Helen D. Blair, "Margaret Keenan Harrais," MKHC, Box 1, Folder 12.

[8]Ernest Hurst Cherrington, *Standard Encyclopedia of the Alcohol Problem*, Frances E. Willard Memorial Library, Evanston, Illinois (hereafter FEWML), 1184.

[9]Margaret Keenan Harrais, Professional resume sketch, MKHC, Box 1, Folder 7.

Normal School where she completed the "scientific" course in 1896.[10] Ready to launch her career on the American frontier, this young woman with an enviable complexion, fine figure and "silky brown hair that curled naturally" accepted a position as Superintendent of Schools for Custer County, Idaho, and moved west.[11] After eight years Margaret returned to Indiana to further her education, earned a B. S. degree from Valparaiso University in 1906, and returned to Idaho to continue her career as a school administrator.[12]

Brought up in an environment of decorum and industrial advancement, Margaret experienced some initial discomfort when exposed to a less structured society in an undeveloped region. Her complaints that Idaho was without most modern conveniences including telegraph and telephone resulted in reproach from the old timers, and her discovery that the railroad did not extend into the area where she lived caused a momentary temptation to return to the comforts of her familiar home. Margaret was accustomed to eastern fashion that dictated long dresses down to her ankles and the practice of modestly crossing her ankles, "but never, no never one knee over the other."[13] This etiquette also prescribed that ladies did not go out unchaperoned, but shortly after her arrival, Margaret found herself alone riding in a stage coach with a man she did not even know. Her mind made up to succeed in her venture, Margaret quickly learned two lessons of the frontier: "no one is interested in what they do back home," and to fit in she

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[10]Commencement Program, 1896, Northern Indiana Normal School, Archives, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana.

[11]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 6.

[12]Margaret Keenan Harrais, Professional resume sketch, MKHC, Box 1, Folder 7.

[13]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 6.

had to accept a new set of standards regarding day-to-day life and behavior.[14] Obviously she adapted to her surroundings because a few years later she bragged that she could "ride like a cowboy and shoot off the heads of rattlesnakes with a six shooter."[15] She also discovered, however, that certain principles cannot be violated.

As a young, attractive and spirited woman it could be expected that Margaret enjoyed attention from men, and one of these suitors became her husband. His name, however, is never mentioned in her papers or memoirs, nor does Margaret indicate for how long they were married.[16] She does however make it clear that her decision to abstain from alcoholic beverages and her commitment to the WCTU was in direct conflict with her husband's desire to open a liquor establishment in Challis, Idaho. Margaret offered him the choice of "his bar and liquor store, or her,"[17] but when he explained that the business was too lucrative to ignore she divorced him and resumed her maiden name.

After a few more years at Idaho's Nampa High School as a teacher and school administrator, and three years in Boise as a clerk in the United States Assay Office, Margaret was ready to move on.[18] The fond memory of a summer trip in 1902 to Skagway and Sitka, Alaska, with her older sister, Martha, had not faded. Coupled with this recollection was her belief that people are "divided into two classes, those who go and

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[14]Ibid., 4.

[15]Ibid., 6.

[16]Noble County Ohio biographical records and Margaret's Idaho Teaching Certificate indicate her first husband's name was "McGowan." ("The County of Noble: Biographical Sketches," and Letter from May L. Scott to Mrs. Margaret McGowan, June 14, 1905, MKHC, Box 1, Folder 7.)

[17]Blair, "Margaret Keenan Harrais."

[18]Margaret Keenan Harrais, Professional resume sketch.

those who stay."[19] As one of the "goers" looking for a new challenge, the tug towards the mysteries of the north was strong. Margaret later remembered that "Alaska was all beginnings. That was the lure that brought me to Alaska and has kept me contented here through many years."[20] In 1914 she accepted the position as principal of schools in Skagway, where she is credited with starting a parent teacher association and, with school board approval, initiating the WCTU school savings plan that taught children the concepts of thrift and financial planning.[21] *The Union Signal*, the official publication of the WCTU, reported that under Margaret's guidance the children made the first deposit in the newly established Bank of Alaska when they opened an account with eighty-five dollars.[22] During her tenure in Skagway, Margaret also participated in the first Territorial Convention of the WCTU in May 1915, at which she was elected vice-president of the organization for Alaska.[23]

During the summer of 1916 the nation geared up for general elections, and prohibition was a major issue debated across the country. In her capacity as a territorial leader for the WCTU, Margaret accompanied Cornelia Templeton Hatcher, president of Alaska's chapter, on a speaking tour of the Interior. The women arrived in Fairbanks at the end of June and spent three weeks urging residents to vote for prohibition. Although Margaret was not considered the primary lecturer, she addressed and apparently impressed

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[19]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 27.

[20]Ibid., 28.

[21]Mrs. Sara Louisa Oberholtzer, "School Savings Banks," *The Union Signal*, May 11, 1916, FEWML.

[22]Ibid., Florence Boole, "WCTU Convention in the Northland," October 5, 1916.

[23]Ibid., and "Program of First Territorial Convention Woman's Christian Temperance Union," *The Daily Alaskan*, (Skagway), May 13, 1915.

a special meeting of the Woman's Civic Club.[24] Before she could leave, the Fairbanks School Board extended an unsolicited offer to accept the position of Superintendent of schools[25] at an annual salary of $2475.[26] Later Hatcher reported that this appointment "is significant of the attitude of the fathers and mothers of the North toward the ideals and character of those to whom they would intrust the training of their children."[27]

The day before the announcement of Margaret's appointment, W. F. Thompson, editor of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, used his column to respond to Mrs. Hatcher's invitation for a face-to-face debate. An anti-prohibitionist, Thompson accused Hatcher of being a quasi-Alaskan because she and her husband usually wintered in Seattle and further chided that she had "nothing worth debating."[28] Dubbed by Hatcher the "Booze Bugler of Fairbanks,"[29] Thompson continued his diatribe by stating that her "letters are the same old prohibition stuff, written years ago and mimeographed for constant delivery by every woman who has a pleasing appearance and a good voice and who is willing to desert her home and her husband and tramp about the country on a salary of $15.00 a month."[30] Margaret somehow escaped Thompson's attack.

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[24]Cornelia T. Hatcher, "Campaigning in the Heart of Alaska," *The Union Signal*, September 28, 1916, FEWML.

[25]"Miss Keenan Elected Head of Schools," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, July 14, 1916.

[26]Fairbanks School Board to Margaret Keenan, July 11, 1916. MKHC, Box 1, Folder 7.

[27]Hatcher, "Campaigning in the Heart of Alaska," *The Union Signal*, September 28, 1916, FEWML.

[28]"Mrs. Hatcher Ends Prohibition Fight," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, July 13, 1916.

[29]Hatcher, "Campaigning in the Heart of Alaska," *The Union Signal*, September 28, 1916, FEWML.

[30]"Mrs. Hatcher Ends Prohibition Fight," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, July 13, 1916.

Founded in Cleveland, Ohio, in November 1874, the WCTU was established by women concerned with strengthening the values that families represented and emphasizing the home as the center of society. Their points of focus were the abolition of liquor and tobacco, the end of the "Social Evil (prostitution) and later, women's rights."[31] More than forty special departments of the WCTU assigned a member in each chapter the responsibility of working on a specific problem. Prevention was considered a goal, and targeting children in the schoolroom became their arena. Margaret later philosophized that she "never did have much hope of reforming middle-aged people, but there are measureless possibilities in the children."[32] Through the use of *The Temperance Lesson Book*, a text sponsored by the WCTU and sanctioned as part of the American public school curriculum, America's youth were introduced to the physical and social ills associated with drinking, smoking and careless sexual activity. A leading nineteenth century women's organization, the WCTU adopted "program concerns ranging far beyond narrow temperance goals," and its membership "found temperance the most congenial cause through which to increase their involvement in public life."[33] Thus, temperance was the symbolic medium for social change, not simply the message.

In her professional capacity Margaret was strategically placed to advance the WCTU platform, and in the election day edition of the *News-Miner* Thompson, who apparently continued to ignore Margaret's affiliation with the WCTU, unwittingly gave credence to what she was doing in the schools to further the organization's cause.

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[31]J. C. Furnas, *The Americans. A Social History of the United States 1587-1914* (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), 738.

[32]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 126.

[33]Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest For Power and Liberty, 1873-1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), xiv and xvi.

Thompson reported that at a reception held a few days prior Margaret urged the one hundred parents in attendance to support her belief that:

> schools of today are made up of but two classes; home-makers and home-providers of tomorrow. The school girls of today are the mothers and homemakers of tomorrow, and the school boys are the fathers and home-providers of the future. . . . [Their] whole education should be with that end in view.[34]

On November 9 Thompson's newspaper reported that Alaskan voters had cast their ballots almost two to one for prohibition. To further document that Thompson did not include Margaret in his anti-prohibition campaign, he remarked in his November 16 editorial that although he favored the "wet" laws, he believed in women's rights and their participation in government, and although he doubted she would accept, he boldly stated that Margaret should be elected to the city council.

Margaret was undoubtedly pleased with the election results, although the passage of prohibition threatened her chosen profession because, as she told a *Union Signal* reporter, "the public schools of Alaska were supported by revenue from the liquor traffic."[35] With prohibition to go into effect January 1, 1918, funding for education became a crucial concern. Prior to the Treaty of Cession, the Russian Church funded education heavily, and "until 1905 the Russian Orthodox Church spent more money on education in Alaska than did the American government."[36] This reality combined with the

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[34]"Reception Is Given For Miss Keenan." *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, November 7, 1916.

[35]"Vice-President of Alaska WCTU Visits National Headquarters." *The Union Signal*, July 12-19, 1917, FEWML.

[36]Niilo E. Koponen, "The History of Education in Alaska: With Special Reference to the Relationship Between the Bureau of Indian Affairs Schools and the State School System" (Ed.D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1964), 24.

knowledge that the first schools in Alaska after the American purchase in 1867 were established, funded and operated by American churches caused many Alaskans to become discontent with this perceived "un-American mixing of Church and State."[37] The termination of Russian philanthropy in 1917 combined with the impending loss of saloon and liquor license fee revenue due to the passage of prohibition threatened Alaska's educational system.

On January 10, 1917, James Wickersham, Alaska's delegate to Congress, Dan Sutherland, a member of the Territorial Senate of Alaska, and Cornelia Hatcher, president of the WCTU in Alaska, testified in favor of prohibition before the House of Representatives' Committee on the Territories and for control over the Alaska Fund, twenty-five per cent of which supported education. Mrs. Hatcher stated that before coming to Washington, D. C., the trio had assured the teachers that "we could count upon Congress allowing us to at least administer our own funds. It is our money; it is not anybody else's money."[38] Six days later Mrs. Hatcher joined three representatives of the national WCTU to provide similar testimony before a Senate committee. In this appeal, Mrs. Hatcher emphatically requested that Congress "either release to us the Alaska fund, to be disbursed under Territorial authority, or supplement it by an increased appropriation for schools."[39] The pleadings were favorably received, and on March 3, 1917, Congress provided for the emergency by passing a new act which allowed the Alaska legislature to appropriate territorial funds for educational purposes. This led the Alaska legislature to promptly enact the Uniform School Act of 1917 which, among other things, stipulated

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[37]Ibid., 34.

[38]House. *Prohibition of Liquors in Territory of Alaska*. 64th Cong., 2nd sess., 1917. H. R. 19188. 25.

[39]Senate. *Prohibition in Alaska*. 64th Cong., 2nd sess., 1917. S. 7963. 9.

that funds for the support of schools were to come from municipal and territorial sources.[40] Margaret confidently reported to *The Union Signal*:

> All the schools outside of incorporated towns are to be provided for entirely from the territorial treasury. The schools in the incorporated towns will receive seventy-five percent of the necessary funds from the territory and twenty-five percent from direct taxation in these towns. For the first time in the history of Alaska the education of the boys and girls of the territory will be carried on with clean, untainted money.[41]

When Margaret arrived in Fairbanks in the summer of 1916, in addition to prohibition and funding for education, Fairbanks was a buzz with talk about the construction of a railroad begun in 1915 from Seward to Fairbanks that, according to Margaret, marked "progress" but would "bring down the curtain on a highly picturesque era, [and] mark the passing of the old regime."[42] She and others heralded the positive impact the railroad would have by lowering prices and shortening travel time to the Outside, but at the same time they lamented the negative impact this tie with the world would have. One concern was that Fairbanksans would have to use dimes, nickels and pennies, heretofore considered only souvenir coins and play things for the children. Margaret enjoyed telling the story about a young school boy who was given two nickels by a gentleman from Outside. After inspecting the coins front and back the youngster tossed them into a nearby cuspidor. His action caused Margaret to remark, "they

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[40]William K. Keller, "A History of Education in Alaska 1741 - 1940" (Ed.D. Dissertation, State College of Washington, 1940), 116-20.

[41]"Vice-President of Alaska WCTU Visits National Headquarters," *The Union Signal*, July 12-19, 1917, FEWML.

[42]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 42.

represented no value to him. That day is passing and with it some of the old-time methods, also some of the old-time extravagance."[43] On another occasion she watched two small children sitting on the boardwalk playing with coins. When she asked them what they were doing they demonstrated their game and explained that the winner kept the coins. The coins were silver dollars! Margaret knew that such luxury was short lived, and these examples convinced her that Fairbanks children needed to learn different values. Margaret also realized that with the coming of a railroad, the days of stage coach and dog-sled travel were limited.

Before dogs lost their importance in Alaskan transportation Margaret wanted the experience of traveling on one of those sleds made of hickory lashed together with moosehide thongs that were "as pliable as a huge worm."[44] During her Christmas vacation in 1916 she hired a musher to take her down the seventy-seven mile Fairbanks-Nenana Trail where she spent a week at the new government railroad town as the guest of Renee and Thomas Riggs. He was the construction supervisor for the Interior Division of the Railroad Commission who would later serve as Alaska's territorial governor from 1918 to 1921. The cold lifeless stillness of the gray twilight on a mid-winter day filled Margaret with the "spirit of the real Alaskan winter," and by journey's end she felt pride in her one hundred fifty mile accomplishment. Someday, she believed, when she was a "real sourdough" she could say, "Why yes, I was down that right-of-way long before the railroad was built."[45] In addition to savoring the natural beauty that she had trouble finding words to describe, Margaret acquired a respect for the people who had lived for so

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[43]Ibid., 43.

[44]Ibid., 32.

[45]Ibid., 32 and 42.

long in this remote area removed even from the conveniences that Fairbanks offered. She later mused, "I do so envy these sourdoughs their *something*, I do not know exactly what it is; something that has been acquired by years of straight thinking and hard hitting in this land so fresh from the hand of God."[46] It would be another eight years before Margaret would have an opportunity to again explore the north's wilderness.

In April 1917, at the request of President Woodrow Wilson, Congress declared war on Germany, and American soldiers were soon sent to Europe to assist the Allies. The American public was slow to accept their involvement, but by fall most expressed a growing commitment to the war effort, and people gave their money and time and voluntarily limited their consumption of vital commodities.[47] Although many of Margaret's friends Outside assumed that Fairbanks was too isolated to feel the effects of the war effort, she did not hesitate to recount the same sincere public cooperation in Alaska as in the rest of the country.

In the fall Alaska's First Lady, Anne Hall Strong, invited the women of the Interior to join with the ladies of the "Coast" to raise six hundred dollars, the amount necessary to purchase and maintain a bed at the American Ambulance Hospital near Paris.[48] Fairbanks women immediately accepted the challenge and established a Ways and Means Committee to determine the methodology to achieve the goal. The ideas of a food sale and benefit ball were approved, "then came an uneasy pause," Margaret remembered.[49] "This was

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[46]Ibid., 46.

[47]Ernest R. May and the Editors of Life. *War, Boom and Bust.* The Life History of the United States. Volume 10: 1917 - 1932. (New York: Time Incorporated. 1964) 7-12.

[48]Margaret Keenan Harrais. "Alaska Periscope." 56.

[49]Ibid.

essentially a woman's project; it must be especially successful; it would be if only it were advertised in some unique way; why not a woman's edition of the daily paper?"[50] At the urging of his wife, W. F. Thompson, editor of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, reluctantly offered his staff and equipment for the project with the understanding that half of the gross receipts from the sale of the paper would go to the women and half to the newspaper. His other stipulation was that Margaret Keenan must be the editor.

At the end of September, Margaret secured commitments from fifty-three women to contribute articles, and for the next two months she spent every evening after school at the *News-Miner* office organizing, editing and arranging. "Hundreds of copies were to be sent Outside to the home friends, and it must, it *must* do us and Alaska credit," she declared.[51] While Margaret concerned herself with the actual copy, Katherine Pratt sold advertising, and Harriett Hess organized the assembly and sales of the paper. Mrs. Pratt's unorthodox method of selling advertising space brought in record amounts of cash. Margaret commented:

> I never could learn what their rates were; in fact, I do not think they had any. They just sized up their victim with an appraising eye and charged all the traffic would stand. They not only could induce a man to turn his pockets inside out, but they could make him feel that he was honored by being asked to do so.[52]

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[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid., 63.

[52]Ibid., 65.

After two months' work, Margaret and her committee were ready to produce their Women's Edition of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* on Thanksgiving Day. The paper contained a News Section comprised of "extracts from letters written by some of our former Fairbanks boys who are now in training or 'somewhere in France.' "[53] On Thanksgiving Eve an outraged Thompson appeared at Margaret's desk for the first time in the two months of work. He expounded that the paper could not yet go to press because it did not include a "news" section by his journalistic definition. Emphatically Margaret explained that letters home from Fairbanks servicemen abroad *was* news, and furthermore, the press must roll in order to free the women in the circulation department in time to prepare their Thanksgiving dinners. Finally Thompson conceded that as the editor Margaret could make the decisions. The paper, containing War, News and Editorial sections was printed, the ladies had time to prepare dinner, and the Women's Edition appeared for sale as promised on November 29.[54]

When the final receipts were tallied, the Fairbanks women smuggly announced that "a community of less than fifteen hundred people calmly jingled out of its pockets the price of six hospital beds in one month, at the same time meeting all of their demands of the hour."[55] Five Canadian-born residents of Fairbanks pledged six hundred dollars among themselves—the total hoped for by the entire Alaska Territory![56] When Thompson received his half of the proceeds, he acknowledged that he had actually profited by eighty-seven dollars and fifty cents. Needless to say, this fact pleased Margaret as did the general

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[53]Women's Edition; *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, November 29, 1917, MKHC, Box 6.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 67.

[56]Women's Edition, *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, November 29, 1917.

good will that resulted from this effort. After the paper appeared she received only two calls from contributors who "permanently mislaid their tempers;" one demanding an explanation for why her initials were omitted "from a two-inch article in a symposium of opinions as to why we are in the war," and another complaining that her middle name was misspelled in the by-line of a feature article on the front page.[57] Margaret excused these women's outbursts because both were *cheechakos*, or newcomers to the north.

In another effort to demonstrate that Alaska was not too far removed from the United States to be concerned about the war, Margaret joined in the national appeal to sell Liberty Bonds to replenish the government's defense coffers. This fund-raising campaign was directed at the Fairbanks school children and, like the Women's Edition of the newspaper, netted phenomenal results. Each of the one hundred eighty-six students was expected to buy one bond over the next year. To kick off the effort, Margaret personally underwrote $10,000 worth of bonds, no small commitment on her salary. "The public received the announcement with a gasp of astonishment, followed by a gleam of appreciation," Margaret proudly recounted.[58] Arrangements were made with the First National Bank to establish accounts for each student in grades one through twelve to facilitate the time-purchase of the bonds paid for with money they had earned. "In some way it must represent sacrifice," Margaret instructed the student body.[59] A few hours after Margaret announced her plans to the assembled students, a girl approached her to make an outright purchase with fifty dollars she had earned from picking and selling

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[57]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 67-68. Mary Lee Davis probably complained about the spelling of her name which appeared in print as "Mary Lea Davis."

[58]Ibid., 73.

[59]Ibid., 74

berries the previous summer. While this transaction was handled a line formed of other students ready to commit. That day Margaret sold fifteen bonds, some fully paid, some on time. Her scheme was off to a good start.

The plan allowed a student to pay one dollar down and two and a half dollars monthly, the Bank holding the bond until the final installment was paid. "This was no mean contribution in bookkeeping from a bank that had formerly required a minimum of three hundred dollars to open an account, and had shoved back to the depositor all nickels and dimes as scrap metal."[60] To facilitate earning the necessary money, Margaret established an employment office in the school which provided job opportunities for the students that could be carried out in conjunction with their Junior Red Cross requirements. Many of the girls worked at domestic chores and child care, while the boys eagerly seized the opportunity to cut ice from the Chena River and sell it to individual homes. Most Fairbanksans used water delivered regularly by the "water wagon" at twenty-five cents for ten gallons. This water was full of minerals and not suitable for "fine laundry or shampoos." Therefore the boys' delivery of ice, which thawed into soft water, was an appreciated luxury.[61]

By the end of the school year in 1918 the Fairbanks school children had purchased 210 fifty dollar bonds, an average per student of sixty dollars and eighty-four cents, for a grand total of $11,049.79.[62] The results of this nation-wide school Liberty Bond sale were published in a leading education journal, and "none equaled the Fairbanks record."[63]

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[60]Ibid., 73

[61]Ibid., 75.

[62]"Report of War Work of Fairbanks, Alaska Public School."MKHC, Box 1, Folder 8.

[63]Ibid. and President, Fairbanks School Board, "To Whom It May Concern," March 25, 1918. MKHC, Box 1, Folder 7.

In all, the people of the United States contributed over $21.5 billion through this campaign.[64]

As previously mentioned, the Liberty Bond sale ran simultaneously with the students' Junior Red Cross activities. During Christmas week of 1917, with the temperature hovering around fifty-five to sixty below zero, the students conducted a local contribution drive netting $3,192.50 from 798 subscribers.[65] These funds gave Fairbanksans the satisfaction of knowing that they supported six French and Belgian war orphans for a year. As before, the entire community joined together in these fund raising efforts. John Butrovitch, who later became an Alaska legislator, was seven years old at the time and remembered that Mrs. Arthur McGowan offered a cash prize donated to the French Orphan's Fund in the name of the young Fairbanksan who offered the best name for a stray cat that she had adopted. In the spirit of the cause, John submitted the name "Orphina" and won the contest, receiving cake and ice cream as his tangible reward.[66]

During World War II Margaret engaged herself in relief efforts with the same eagerness displayed during the first great war. Darning socks and mending clothes for the El Nathan Children's Home in Valdez and knitting afghans for disabled veterans became on-going projects which she continued after the war. At war's end she salvaged left over Red Cross supplies to benefit the local orphanage.

In July of 1918 Margaret stopped in at the local Red Cross headquarters while visiting in Seattle. Certain that the Fairbanks contribution was inconsequential to the

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[64]May, 9.

[65]Margaret Keenan Harrais. "Alaska Periscope," 77.

[66]John Butrovitch. interview with author. September 28. 1995.

overall fundraising efforts, Margaret felt "very small and ineffectual."[67] She reservedly introduced herself to an official who "electrified" her with his congratulatory handshake. Bewildered, Margaret asked exactly what had Alaska done to warrant such a greeting. Enthusiastically he informed her that Alaska raised seven times its assigned contribution but then cautiously asked if she had seen the quota assessments sent from Red Cross headquarters. "Oh, yes," Margaret replied, "but no one ever paid much attention to them. It was taken for granted that we would exceed our quota, so no one gave them much thought."[68] As Margaret departed the Seattle Red Cross office with the knowledge that Alaska had more than contributed its share, she hoped that this kind of attention would convince people Outside that the territory should be recognized as a "bona fide member of the family."[69]

In the summer of 1916, while visiting friends in Seattle before moving to the Interior, Margaret was given a letter of introduction to Martin Luther Harrais of Chena, the neighboring gold camp to Fairbanks. When her boat docked at this camp seven miles downriver from Fairbanks, she inquired after Harrais and felt relief to learn that he was "somewhere on the creeks."[70] Margaret later recalled that she "always had a little hesitancy about presenting letters of introduction. They seem to say so patently, 'Well, here I am. What are you going to do about it?' So, in my heart I congratulated His Single Blessedness on his escape from responsibility as host or entertainer."[71] Because of

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[67]Margaret Keenan Harrais. "Alaska Periscope.. 79.

[68]Ibid.. 80.

[69]Ibid.. 81.

[70]Ibid.. 82.

[71]Ibid.

Martin's prominence as a successful miner, businessman and civic leader it was impossible for Margaret to forget him. However it was not until the spring of 1917, when he moved into a room across the hall at the hotel/rooming house from her, that she actually met him. Not long afterward he confided in her that he thought her a "damned fine girl."[72]

As they became acquainted, Margaret fell in love with this man who had a "deep voice and slightly foreign accent" and had been born in Riga, Latvia, Russia, on January 2, 1865.[73] Affected by the German occupation of northern Latvia, Martin's parents became slaves of the Germans. Years later, in a letter to the United States Civil Service Commission requesting the opportunity to serve in the United States military during World War I, Martin explained that when he was fourteen years old an act of disrespect towards the Germans resulted in his expulsion from Russia and he was shipped to sea."[74] For nine years his life followed the tide until at age twenty-three he came ashore at San Pedro, California, "eager to acquire the English language and that indefinable *something* that Americans possessed that he had never had."[75] He had learned some English while sailing on British ships but realized quickly that his vocabulary was mostly profanity. The need to improve his language encouraged him to place the small Russian Bible that had belonged to his mother next to a King James version, pick out corresponding words, and in this way improve the quality of the language of his new home. With night courses and classes at a local YMCA, Martin received an education while working in the southern

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[72]Ibid., 91c.

[73]Ibid., 94. and Martin Harrais to U. S. Civil Service Commission, February 18, 1918. MKHC. Box 1, Folder 2.

[74]Martin Harrais to U.S. Civil Service Commission. February 18, 1918.

[75]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 99.

California ship yards. When the ship building industry in California ran into troubled times Martin moved to Seattle where work could be found. With enough education to consider college, Martin entered the University of Washington in 1892 as a sub-freshman and received a B. S. degree in mining engineering on May 23, 1897, with academic and athletic honors. The next day, in company with four other young men, he headed to the Dawson gold fields via the Chilkoot Pass, arriving at the destination in mid-August with "fifteen dollars in his pocket."[76] When the Yukon gold waned Martin moved over to Alaska's Tanana Valley to continue his mining efforts. He profited financially and emotionally in Alaska's Interior, and when Margaret once asked him what it was about life in the north that attracts and holds men, he remarked:

> Outside we were all swimming around and round like goldfish in a glass bowl; but some of us thought we would like to try being a real fish in a real stream. Alaska gives us just that—a chance to be a real fish in a real stream. After that we do not like to go back to the glass bowl again.[77]

His quest for a larger freedom matched Margaret's, although she had not yet made a personal commitment to remain in Alaska. Mounting frustration at work caused Margaret to re-think her future in the north.

A supply order for school year 1917-18 had been mailed outside with specific shipping instructions. Margaret was outraged when a letter arrived from the supplier advising that to save money they had selected a less expensive shipping method. The alternate route was slower, and the school's supplies for the year spent the winter frozen in somewhere on the Upper Yukon. Margaret complained that she "spent half of every night

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[76]Ibid., 102-3.

[77]Ibid., 93.

preparing working material for the next day—thanks to the dear shipping clerks."[78] Incidents like this coupled with an unusually cold winter found Margaret at year's end suffering from "frazzled nerves."[79] Even praise from the school board did not improve Margaret's outlook: "You have modernized our 'bone dry' curriculum by the introduction of domestic science and manual training and have thereby taught our boys and girls the dignity of labor as well as given them the highest ideals for their future manhood and womanhood."[80] In spite of adulation and adequate funding, without hesitation she accepted a position as principal of schools in Shenandoah, Iowa, where her brother Thomas, former vice-president and mathematics professor at Western Normal College, was now practicing law.[81] Margaret did not record Martin's reaction to the news of her planned departure. However she did mention that at that time he was suffering financial losses and did not invite her to stay on with him. At the time of departure Martin traveled with Margaret on the Valdez stage down the Richardson Trail as far as Chitina, where he got off to go to work for the Kennecott Copper Corporation as head of a reconnaissance party in the Upper Chitina District. A few months later Margaret could still recall that moment of parting:

> The muscles of my throat tighten yet as I think of that last hour in Chitina—the attempt at casualness, the enforced cheerfulness by which we each tried to make the situation a bit easier for the other. We faced stark

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[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Mary H. Zimmerman to Margaret Keenan, March 1, 1917. MKHC, Box 1, Folder 7.

[81]Margaret Keenan. Alumni Records. Archives. Valparaiso University, Valparaiso. Indiana.

> loneliness for an indefinite period, but there was no alternative. Even love in a cottage presupposes a cottage.[82]

Margaret arrived outside in the midst of the devastating 1918 influenza epidemic and became critically ill. While sick she contracted pneumonia and nearly died. In an effort to find a suitable place to convalesce she tendered her resignation to the Iowa school district and tried several Colorado locations, Idaho, Portland and the nearby coast but found each "too high, too cold, too rainy, or too something."[83] Finally San Diego was discovered to be the ideal spot. She bought a "little house and a big garden," which proved a good combination when she discovered "something healing to both body and spirit in just turning over shovelful after shovelful of rich, soft earth."[84] In addition to gardening, Margaret involved herself with the California WCTU and served as publicity woman for the National WCTU.[85] When Martin received word of the seriousness of her illness and that she was "shifting from pillar to post among strangers" he realized the depth of his feelings and joined her in California. Margaret and Martin were married at the San Diego YWCA October 25, 1920. A few years previously she had commented to a friend that if she did marry Martin, it would only happen when she also made up her mind "to marry Alaska, too."[86] At the age of forty-eight she obviously felt comfortable with a commitment to another marriage and to Alaska.

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[82]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 112.

[83]Ibid., 116.

[84]Ibid., 117.

[85]Cherrington, 1185.

[86]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 108.

The newlyweds spent the winter of 1920-21 in California, and the following summer Martin returned to Alaska to continue his mining. The next several years were spent in this manner: "delightful winters together in California and lonely, tho fruitful, summers separated."[87] By 1924 Margaret had regained her strength and desire to return to Alaska, and she forestalled Martin's trip south by accepting a teaching position at McCarthy. Realizing that home is where the heart is, she packed and headed back to Alaska and a "log-cabin home as close to my husband's work as possible."[88] If she had any doubts about her decision, they were dispelled on the journey north during which she recalled, "everyone visited with everyone else; cabin boy and captain, passenger and flunkey, all mingled together in the common-democracy-of-the-North. With swift realization I said to myself, 'These are my people. After an enforced absence of several years, I am going home.' "[89]

In McCarthy, Martin continued his mining interest, while Margaret settled into their three-room log cabin. She gave glowing reports of the living room complete with sewing machine and "a couch piled with more fancy cushions than I ever before saw on one couch, a circular dining table, rocking chairs, heating stove, and the most remarkable phonograph that ever strayed so far from home."[90] But the kitchen proved most comfortable, and she later remarked that "for the first time in my life I am content to sit alone at a table long enough to eat my meals. Ordinarily I am up roaming around with my

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[87]Ibid., 118.

[88]Ibid., 119.

[89]Ibid., 122.

[90]Ibid., 123-4.

food in my hands, shifting from straight chair to rocker and back again, trying to read a magazine, anything to dispel the loneliness."[91]

For the next eight years Margaret taught school at McCarthy instilling in the children the principles of temperance and thrift as she had in Skagway and Fairbanks. Summers were spent with Martin at his mining claim enjoying the search for copper and hiking and horseback riding into the nearby mountains and canyons. While at McCarthy, Margaret witnessed with pride the first women jurors performing their duty and continued her involvement with the WCTU, accepting the position of President for Alaska's chapter. In the late 1920s a national move commenced for an amendment to prohibition, and Margaret was offered a leadership position in the newly formed Women's National Commission for Law Enforcement and Law Observance—an organization representing fifteen million women nation-wide. Because acceptance required a move to the east coast, Margaret declined the invitation stating that it "was out of the question since there was no place for The Skipper in that scheme of life."[92] Her commitments to Martin and Alaska were beyond negotiation.

In 1932 the Harraises felt the impact of the great depression when they lost all of their savings in a failed Seattle bank, and their hope that Margaret's salary would suffice was shattered when due to decreased enrollment the McCarthy school closed. The final blow came when the railroad closed into Martin's mining claims, eliminating access. Destitute, the Harraises moved to Cordova where Martin planned to take over the operation of a run-down sawmill. Margaret recalled that, "youth was gone, enthusiasm was gone; all that remained was one another and a grim determination to keep our chins

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[91]Ibid., 124.

[92]Ibid., 153.

above water and be self-sustaining."[93] A summer at the mill proved that the business was not salvageable, and just when they wondered what next to do Margaret was offered a contract to teach at Ellamar, a small coastal village between Valdez and Cordova. The new job was not of the caliber to which she had become accustomed, but now that she was married more prestigious opportunities were closed to her.[94] Not in a position to quibble, Margaret accepted the teaching job, leaving Martin in Valdez where he subsequently received a political appointment as U. S. Commissioner and bought and renovated a six-room house. Margaret left Ellamar at the close of the 1935 school year to re-join Martin and enjoy life in the first house they had ever owned. She bragged to friends in the States that the house had a bathroom and instructed that such luxury could not be taken for granted: "It costs over three hundred dollars to install one, and eternal vigilance to keep it from freezing up in winter."[95] After three years alone in a one-room log cabin at Ellamar, Margaret enjoyed the conveniences of oil for heating and cooking, a vacuum cleaner, electric clothes washer and an electric pump on the well.

The summer of 1935 Martin headed to Mineral Creek, still hoping to find a copper mine. In his absence, Margaret stepped in as Commissioner and later, trying to explain that her duties included all of the functions of a county courthouse, she recalled several cases handled on her first day. A commercial fisherman, whom she knew, was brought before her charged with drunkenness. Margaret sentenced him to ten days in jail, the length of time until the fishing season opened, with a promise that as soon as he was freed he would go right to sea and not get drunk. He replied, "No, I no promise. I might

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[93]Ibid., 172.

[94]Ibid., 177.

[95]Ibid., 185.

happen to get drunk again, and I no like to double-cross you."[96] In another case, a man plead innocent to charges that he stole a boat stating that he had just taken it. He was sentenced to six months in jail "in which to contemplate the difference [between] stealing and just taking."[97] On another occasion Margaret attempted to make a civil marriage ceremony as impressive as possible. She nearly lost her composure, however, when the "ardent groom, instead of the demure 'I do,' responded, 'Bet your life; hope to die!' "[98] The knowledge and experience gained that summer became important to Margaret in the future.

At summer's end, Martin returned from his mining work with news that he had found a promising mining property but it required development. To earn the necessary money, Margaret agreed to return to teaching at Ellamar for one more year. When she came home to Valdez for Thanksgiving she found Martin busily planning for the next season's work. Therefore, a few weeks later, when back at Ellamar, she was shocked to get word that Martin was critically ill. By the time Margaret got to Valdez she learned that Martin was hospitalized in Seward, but stormy weather prevented her from making the trip by sea plane to be at his bedside. While she waited for the weather to improve, news came that Martin had died of cancer at 5:00 P M on Christmas day.[99] He was buried in the Pioneer Plot of the Seward cemetery.[100]

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[96]Ibid., 191.

[97]Ibid., 190.

[98]Ibid., 194.

[99]Obituary, Martin Luther Harrais, *The Valdez Miner*, MKHC, Box 3, Folder 2.

[100]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," 196.

In keeping with her frontier philosophy that no one is interested in how things are done back home or over indulgence with personal problems, she grieved privately and busied herself as Commissioner, receiving an official appointment to the position immediately after Martin's death. She was grateful for the previous summer's experience in the job. In addition she organized a mining library of over three hundred Geological Survey Bulletins and nine cases of maps of Alaska. She renewed her interest in gardening advocating the use of greenhouses, and maintained an active role in the community. Margaret was chairman of the Valdez Community Hospital Board, a member of the Territorial Board of Education, and active in the statehood movement. After statehood in 1959, Margaret was appointed deputy magistrate for the third judicial district, a position she held until 1962 when frail health forced her to retire.

Off and on during these years, Margaret made an effort to publish a manuscript collection of her remembrances of life in Alaska. At the suggestion of family and friends Outside who received her annual Christmas letters that summarized the year's activities and observations, Margaret compiled her writing into a manuscript for publication consideration. In the fall of 1932 she sent the first five chapters to her niece and namesake who was then on the faculty of the English Department at the University of Michigan. The single-spaced, four-page typed response was less than encouraging, and the analysis that the preliminary work was wordy and cluttered with lengthy sentences punctuated randomly by semicolons was to the point. As to content, Margaret's niece chided that her aunt's experiences were not unique—they could be, and were, duplicated elsewhere. "Too many women now are charting unknown seas and are making howling successes of their charts," she stated.[101] She further informed Margaret that she knew several women who

[101]Margaret unidentified surname to Margaret Keenan Harrais, September 18, 1932. MKHC, Box 2, Folder 3.

had prominent positions in the business world, and "they take them very much for granted."[102] Commenting on the chapter that described the Fairbanks war effort, Margaret's niece adamantly instructed that it should be deleted entirely because "preoccupation with the war and the intense partriotism which usually accompanies any statement connected with the war has done more to keep alive the spirit of hate than any other one thing."[103] In her comments about the "emotional significance" of the manuscript, her niece remarked, "I found the frequent hushed reference to swearing...decidedly out of place in the annals of an Alaskan pioneer."[104] Whether Margaret edited her work based on her niece's suggestions is unknown, but from the copy that remained with her papers it would appear she did not. She may have considered her niece's analysis evidence of a generation gap, liberal thinking or uninformed remarks from an individual who had not experienced Alaska and made clear "it is the sort of life I should not endure for long but would welcome for a holiday."[105] A subsequent letter from the niece indicated she may have reacted too harshly in her initial review of the manuscript, and as if to seek forgiveness, she recommended Margaret contact The Writers' Workshop, Inc., in New York City.

The comments from University of Pennsylvania history professor and Alaska historian Jeannette Paddock Nichols offered more encouragement and undoubtedly pleased Margaret: "Your subject matter is *interesting*, and is told in *appropriate style*.... You have the delightful style and the material for a best-seller, and I'll look for its

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[102]Ibid.

[103]Ibid.

[104]Ibid.

[105]Ibid.

appearance with keen anticipation."[106] Dr. Nichols even predicted that the royalties would be sufficient for Margaret to posthumously publish Martin's autobiography that sat in manuscript form.

By 1943 Margaret was in contact with Anita Diamant, an agent for The Writers' Workshop, Inc. Although Diamant believed Margaret's material had the potential to become "a most compelling narrative," she negated the compliment by stating that "you haven't quite used it as effectively as you might."[107] She concluded her four-page criticism by saying, "I know you'll understand how sorry we are not to offer to act as agent for this book...."[108]

Margaret, however, did not accept the refusal, and in another letter to the agent, defended her work. Diamant's second effort to quell Margaret was more specific. She explained that the flowery descriptions and Victorian style were unacceptable and her sentimentality cloying. Diamant's accusation that Margaret's prudishness suggested she wore collars up to her ears and dresses to the floor was the final straw.[109] Margaret's final response was short and succinct:

> No, I shall not attempt to do anything with [the] manuscript along the lines you suggest.... I was writing the spirit of Alaska in an attempt to correct some of the damphoolish [*sic*] ideas you people have of us, but that seems

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[106]Ibid., Jeannette P. Nichols to Margaret Keenan Harrais, August 20, 1941.

[107]Ibid., Anita Diamant to Margaret Keenan Harrais, June 3, 1943.

[108]Ibid.

[109]Ibid., July 13, 1943.

> to be hopeless. Evidently we are too far apart in our basic ideas to be of any assistance to one another.[110]

There is no evidence that Margaret continued efforts to find a publisher even though Senator Bob Bartlett proclaimed that if her letters were turned into book form they "could rank in importance with the Diary of Judge Wickersham."[111] In 1946 Margaret's former Fairbanks pupil, Edby Davis, wrote to her that he thought her manuscript publishable, but too bad it had not been printed twenty years ago. "Now," Edby reminded her, "Mary Lee Davis & others has flooded the market with simular material. [*sic*]"[112] But Margaret steadfastly defended her reason for creating the manuscript. In a letter to Dora Sweeney of Juneau she wrote: "I tried to interpret the real heart and soul [of] Alaska, instead of glorifying infamous characters."[113] With defiant resignation, Margaret told Anita Diamant she could forget about publishing the manuscript, and "I'll go on helping to build Alaska."[114] Eventually, Margaret's unpublished manuscript, entitled *Alaska Periscope*, was placed in a three-ring binder and shelved in the Valdez Public Library.

Margaret's life was filled with dramatic events of her own making. Therefore it was no surprise that she chose her ninetieth birthday to mark official retirement from civil service. Governor William A. Egan praised Margaret's contributions to education, the Democrat party and government service by awarding her Alaska's Certificate of Merit.[115]

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[110]Ibid., Margaret Keenan Harrais to Anita Diamant, August 2, 1943.

[111]"Tribute To An Alaska Lady," *Congressional Record—Senate*, September 6, 1962, MKHC, Box 3, Folder 2.

[112]Edby Davis to Margaret Keenan Harrais, December 11, 1946, MKHC, Box 1, Folder 1.

[113]Margaret Harrais to Dora M. Sweeney, February 6, 1952, MKHC, Box 2, Folder 3.

[114]Ibid., Margaret Harrais to Anita Diamant, June 17, 1943.

[115]William A. Egan to Margaret Keenan Harrais, August 29, 1962. MKHC, Box 1, Folder 12.

Senator Bob Bartlett read into the Congressional Record that "she has possessed always a young spirit in a pioneer land [and] her life has been a model of all that is good and decent and constructive."[116] For fifty years Margaret had been a leader who never let her gender inhibit her role. In fact, at the beginning of her professional career in Idaho she was told that the Nampa School District "never had a man Principal who did as thorough [and] constructive work."[117] Margaret established and perpetuated a reputation as a woman who was interested in "developing well rounded and well balanced men and women," and her commitment to high standards of excellance was lauded and emulated.[118]

On March 27, 1964, the town of Valdez was evacuated as a result of the Good Friday earthquake which devastated the Prince William Sound region of southcentral Alaska. Margaret, who had been in failing health since the previous fall, was taken inland to Gakona Lodge, where a friend recalled she sat in the lobby knitting her 114th afghan.[119] After an asthmatic attack she was admitted to Faith Hospital in Glennallen, where she died on April 26 a few months short of her ninety-second birthday. In keeping with her wish to be buried where she died, she was interred at the Glennallen cemetery.[120] When her estate was settled, it was discovered that the now mature U. S. Savings Bonds that Margaret had purchased during the past forty years still named the WCTU as beneficiary. Rather than

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[116]"Tribute To An Alaska Lady," *Congressional Record—Senate*, September 6, 1962, MKHC, Box 3, Folder 2.

[117]Mrs. G. W. Lamson to "To Whom It May Concern," July 18, 1914, MKHC, Box 1, Folder 7.

[118]Ibid., V. I. Hahn to Governor J. F. A. Strong, May 25, 1915.

[119]This unfinished afghan is part of the Dorothy Clifton Collection in the Archives at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

[120]Louise Segerquist to Mrs. Fred J. Tooze, President, National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, May 30, 1964, FEWML.

cash these in 1932 when she and Martin lost their savings, Margaret at the age of sixty was willing to resume teaching to earn a living. Her final contribution to the temperance cause amounted to almost $70,000.[121]

Margaret's devotion to temperance began as a child and guided her professional and personal life to selfless heights. It is therefore ironic that towards the end of her life when she received praise for her societal contributions no mention was made of her commitment to the WCTU or the influence the organization's philosophy had on how she lived her life or performed her service to her community.

[121] Agnes Dubbs Hays. *Heritage of Dedication: One Hundred Years of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union 1874-1974* (Evanston, IL.:Signal Press, 1973), 139.

Chapter Five

Mary Lee Cadwell Davis
1884 - 1966

"No one is indentured to live and labor here!
We have come and we remain solely
because we find in our Alaska 'the makings'
for interesting, wholesome, and useful living."[1]

In 1914 Alaskans celebrated the decision by Congress to fund construction of a railroad from tidewater into the interior. Fairbanks, the northern terminus, felt assured of permanence, and commercially-minded residents looked forward to the day its status would change from mining camp to town. The Fairbanks Commercial Club proudly announced "there is every reason to suppose that Fairbanks will be as distinctively the metropolis of the Greater Alaska of the future as it has been for more than a decade the banner camp of the bottled-up territory."[2] In addition to believing that the lack of reliable year round transportation had delayed the interior's development, many residents were convinced that misconceptions about the climate and the belief that the inhabitants were "foolhardy miners hobnobbing with Eskimos in the Interior" stagnated migration to Alaska

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[1]Mary Lee Davis, *Uncle Sam's Attic: The Intimate Story of Alaska* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1930), 118.

[2]*Descriptive of Fairbanks "Alaska's Golden Heart"* (Fairbanks: The Fairbanks Commercial Club. April 1916), 7.

and retarded its population growth.[3] United States Geological Survey reports indicated immense mineral wealth still to be had if mining costs could be reduced, and this information coupled with news of the railroad piqued the interest of people outside. If coal for fuel could be brought from the Nenana fields into Fairbanks to replace the dwindling timber supply, minerals that required mechanized methods of extraction could be more economically mined.[4] The railroad could deliver the coal, and this transportation link promised to be the harbinger of prosperous times and cement Fairbanks' future.

The field was ripe for serious-minded writers to eradicate the image of the frozen northland, dance hall girls and the wild stampede days popularized by novelists like Rex Beach and Jack London. An authentic portrayal of Alaska's potential would surely convince Americans after all that the territory had been a wise purchase. For a young woman interested in mining and intent on launching a professional writing career Fairbanks presented unique opportunities, and Mary Lee Davis' arrival in the Interior during the summer of 1917 placed her in an enviable position.

Related to colonial New Englanders and American pioneers, Mary Lee grew up on the Atlantic seaboard surrounded by history, culture, and educational and social opportunities. Born April 20, 1884, in Westfield, New Jersey, and named for her maternal grandmother, Mary Lee was the daughter of Newton Woodworth Cadwell, a lawyer

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[3]Ibid., 5.

[4]In 1916 it was estimated that the Fairbanks community required 18,500 cords of wood per year to furnish heat and electricity. (George Watkin Evans, Consulting Mining Engineer, *Report on the Lignite Creek Coal Area, Nenana Coal Mining District, Alaska,* unpublished report, November 22, 1916, 24.)

turned Presbyterian minister, and Jane Worrall Criswell, the "golden-haired music teacher of Chapman Seminary" in Clinton, New York.[5]

Mary Lee's father, descended from American Revolutionary War veterans, was born in Reading, Michigan, a small community near the Indiana/Ohio border, an area his grandfather had pioneered in the 1700s. Newton's father Ephraim, a founder of nearby Hillsdale College, moved the family to New York state when Newton was a baby, and the younger Cadwell was educated at preparatory schools and Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, where he excelled scholastically and athletically, taking prizes in oratory, boxing and crew. He interrupted his studies for a year and a half to teach at the West Winfield Academy, re-entering Hamilton and graduating with a B. A. degree in 1876. Immediately after graduation, Newton helped found Richfield Springs Seminary, where he served for the next three years as associate principal and teacher of languages, sciences and elocution. While in college his interest and aptitude in law was nurtured by his professors, who encouraged him to undertake special study. In 1879 he sold his interest in the seminary to prepare for his new profession, which led to admission to the New York bar in 1880. However, his desire to practice law came to an abrupt end when he was offered a three thousand dollar bribe to defend a prominent New York politician charged with the murder of a young girl who had been a student at Cadwell's Richfield Springs Seminary. Unable to "defend a confessed murderer," Newton reconsidered his lifelong interest in theology, left the law for New York's Auburn Seminary, and was ordained a Presbyterian minister in September 1882.[6] In 1904 he accepted an honorary Doctor of

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[5]Newton Woodworth Cadwell, Biographical notes, Alumnae Files, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York.

[6]Ibid.

Divinity degree from his Alma Mater, Hamilton College, and in 1921 an honorary L. L. D. was conferred upon him by Maryville College in Tennessee, where for many years he was a Director.[7]

In 1905 Mary Lee published a story about her childhood that chronicled her father's thoughts that influenced his career choice.[8] She described him as a man of "great, hard-knit strength [with] glad, unfaltering faith" who thrived on doing "hard" things as his father had before him.[9] He was grateful to his professors who had steered him toward the law, and for the training and internship in a prominent law firm, but it was too easy. They had not understood his decision to pursue theology and considered it a waste of brilliant talent—"but he knew that he was right. It made all the difference in the world, somehow, this knowing one was right."[10]

What he wanted was to start a church from scratch in "some rough impossible mining camp in the new West," but the church leaders knew that the hard places to do church work "were not the frontier outposts with their wide vision of opportunity and new conquest, but the wearing, wearying round of the home duty."[11] After considerable debate the disappointed Rev. Cadwell accepted leadership of the old, once strong but then faltering First Presbyterian Church of Westfield, New Jersey. The first six months were cruel.

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[7]Ibid.

[8]Mary Lee Davis, "How That Not Many Wise Men After The Flesh." *The Wellesley Magazine* (October 1905).

[9]Ibid., 13.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

Factionalism among the parishioners, developed long before his arrival, strengthened, and half of the membership removed their names from the church rolls and joined the nearby Congregational Church. The quarrel continued with each blaming the other for the demise. Each Sunday became a new challenge for the reverend, who found it increasingly difficult to "preach the simple, glad gospel of charity to these empty, silent pews, these hard, unlit, brooding faces."[12] Rev. Cadwell finally admitted that the church was dead. After such dedicated hard work to make it live, this declaration made him physically ill. His attending physician bluntly told some parishioners that if Rev. Cadwell died it "would not be of the fever, but a broken heart."[13] The doctor's directness caused the church elders to spread the word that prayer and unity were the only hope for the reverend's cure, but most of their prayers were for their own forgiveness. Rev. Cadwell recovered, but the ultimate healing came to the congregation that re-united into one force, which resulted in the growth of the old broken down church. During the next twenty years "850 members were added to the church and the parish took an enviable place in the Presbytery of Elizabeth," its geographic region in northern New Jersey.[14]

In the midst of all this upheaval, Rev. Cadwell married Jane Worrall Criswell on May 14, 1883. Born in 1856, she was christened on January 14, 1857, at the United Presbyterian Church in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, one of the oldest towns in Pennsylvania west of the Susquehanna River, where Jane's ancestors had settled in the

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[12]Ibid., 15.

[13]Ibid., 19.

[14]William K. McKinney, Chas. A. Philhower, and Harry A. Kniffin, *Commemorative History of the Presbyterian Church in Westfield, New Jersey 1728-1928.* Genealogical Society of the West Fields, Westfield, New Jersey, 186.

1730s[15] and her father served as postmaster.[16] Jennie, as she was known as a young woman, was an accomplished pianist and valedictorian of the first Wilson College graduating class in 1873.[17] Wilson, a Presbyterian women's college in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, offered Jane music training in an atmosphere modeled after "the Christian home, where confidence, courtesy, kindly feeling and love for the truth are the ruling forces."[18] The protected environment created by Wilson that withdrew the young ladies "as thoroughly as possible from the fascinations of society"[19] must have appealed to Jane, because she remained at the school an extra year for additional music training.[20] Her formal education complete, Jane accepted a teaching position in the music department at Chapman Seminary in Clinton, New York, where she met Newton when he was a student at Hamilton College. The year before marrying she was back at Wilson filling in as "teacher of music" for Music Professor Edward C. King, who was on a leave of absence.[21]

A year after Jane and Newton married Mary Lee was born, and at Christmas time in 1886 Jeanie Worrall joined the family. Six months after her birth, Jeanie died of typhoid

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[15]International Genealogical Index, 1994 Edition, Family History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, and Alfred Nevin, *Centennial Biography: Men of Mark of Cumberland Valley Pennsylvania 1776 - 187.* (Philadelphia: Fulton Publishing Company, 1876), 424.

[16]Signe J. Kelker to author, May 2, 1996. Special Collections, Ezra Lehman Memorial Library, Shippensburg University, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania.

[17]Commencement Program 1873, C. Elizabeth Boyd Archival Center, Wilson College, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

[18]Ibid., 1871-72 Catalogue, 19.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., Kay Ackerman to author, April 4, 1996.

[21]Ibid., 1881-82 Catalogue, Wilson College and Kay Ackerman to author May 3, 1996.

fever and was buried in Westfield's Fairview Cemetery.[22] On June 9, 1889, Paul Newton was born. He went on to graduate from Princeton University, Harvard Law School and Trinity College, Oxford University in England, and had a career as a practicing attorney on Wall Street.[23] A life-long interest in banjo playing gave him national recognition as an authority about the instrument and its associated folklore.[24] His last public concert was in March 1983 at the Pennsylvania Folk Festival at Wilson College, his mother's *alma mater*. Paul passed away quietly in his ninety-fourth year seven months later.[25] Although Mary Lee did not maintain a close relationship with her brother, throughout their lives they corresponded periodically and according to Paul's widow, "always exchanged gift books at Christmas."[26]

Mary Lee described herself as a child who "loved all sorts of mysteries and weird things, and weaving queer stories all alone."[27] Life in what she sketched as the cheerless haunted old manse should have fueled her imagination, but she was too much alone and too restrained to enjoy its offerings. Her father took his work very seriously and was frequently absent from the home or preoccupied with his responsibilities, while her mother made a sincere effort to fulfill the expectations of a Victorian preacher's wife. Frequent

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[22]Phyllis Hansen to author, November 20, 1995, Genealogical Society of the West Fields, Westfield, New Jersey.

[23]"1928 Radcliffe Alumnae Information," Archives, The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[24]Unidentified newspaper clipping, *New York Times*, February 1971, Archives, Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

[25]"Memorials," *Princeton Weekly Alumni Magazine*, May 2, 1984, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

[26]Joyce Cadwell Lewis to author, May 7, 1996.

[27]Mary Lee Davis, "Little Sister," *The Wellesley Magazine* (December 1905), 102.

entertaining by protocol, not choice, visiting the sick and making calls left her "foolishly busy" in Mary Lee's opinion.[28] In actuality her parents' obligations left Mary Lee alone a great deal of the time with a bright and active mind, and she struggled to find her place. When her father was home he spent much of his time in his study, and Mary Lee discovered that this book-lined room provided a retreat for time alone with him . After all, she thought, he might need help writing his sermon or incur matters on which he needed her opinion. This concerned Mrs. Cadwell who did not share her husband's or daughter's love for philosophical discussions. To avoid disappointing her mother, when Mary Lee entered the study she always carried a juvenile book for appearance's sake in case Mrs. Cadwell appeared.

Rev. Cadwell easily accepted the obligations of his profession, but Mrs. Cadwell found her role difficult to understand and fulfill. A self-described fun-loving person by nature, she found her role oppressive. Feeling inadequate and weak compared to her husband, Jane looked to her daughter for strength.

In church meetings Mrs. Cadwell insisted Mary Lee sit beside her so she could tightly hold her hand, and in all things Jane feared "something would not be right."[29] She was in constant fear of disappointing her husband. Needing Mary Lee as she did, she resented her daughter's time spent in the study, playing with other children or weaving fairy tales which she shared with confounded church members. In another attempt to please her mother Mary Lee distanced herself from her playmates, rationalizing her mother's belief that "these people are so very different."[30] In a childlike way Mrs. Cadwell

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid., 103.

[30]Ibid.

confided her fears and unhappiness to Mary Lee, but with her husband "she was always very bright and very happy and cheerful."[31] Mary Lee found her mother "very strange and hard to understand," and an incident associated with learning her catechism heightened her awareness that there were confusing differences between herself and her mother, and between her parents themselves.[32]

Mrs. Cadwell offered to oversee Mary Lee's memorization of the Presbyterian catechism. Part way through the process Rev. Cadwell challenged Mary Lee to a convivial recitation match to see who could get the farthest without looking in the text. Confidently Mary Lee began then suddenly stopped when she noticed her father's expression change from a smile to one of shock. Mary Lee indignantly defended her memory, sure she was correct in what she said, until she noticed her mother's "face was very flushed and her mouth quivered just a very little."[33] Apologetically Mrs. Cadwell explained that she had given Mary Lee the catechism book that she herself had used as a child, not realizing that different Presbyteries had unique versions. She assured her husband that she would hide her little "heretical book" and use his text. This episode left Mary Lee puzzled about theological matters and feeling that her parents did not realize the sincere effort she had put forth to learn. "It was very strange that the books differed. It destroyed many of one's illusions."[34] Her thoughts deepened until she admitted that maybe the different way each parent perceived the catechism book more accurately represented differences between them and their relationship with each other.

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[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid., 103.

[33]Ibid., 107.

[34]Ibid., 108.

Feeling she had disappointed her husband, Mrs. Cadwell went "away, for a time, to rest," believing that "different air and rest" would put things right.[35] Her mother's absence was a blow, and the demand that Mrs. Cadwell put on Mary Lee to serve in her place in the church and in the home was indeed heavy for a young school girl, but Mary Lee stoically "accepted the trust very seriously."[36]

Through Mary Lee's child's eyes, Mrs. Cadwell was not easy to explain, but the women of the church considered her "the ideal minister's wife."[37] When Jane Cadwell died July 3, 1914, in Rome, Italy, while touring the continent with her husband following their son Paul's graduation from Oxford,[38] a friend of hers who considered her perfectly suited for her role and a good partner for the reverend remarked, "I cannot imagine Dr. Cadwell without her."[39] The women of Westfield and the Olivet Presbyterian Church in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where the Cadwell's had moved in 1902, honored Jane's "Christian character" and friendship with a bronze plaque hung in the Atlantic City church. An article written about the memorial service held October 11, 1915, indicated that Rev. Cadwell and Paul participated in the ceremonies. However, no mention is made about Mary Lee's attendance.[40]

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[35]Ibid., 109.

[36]Ibid. 110.

[37]"Mrs. Cadwell, The Ideal Minister's Wife, Her Twenty Years in Westfield." Talk given by Mrs. Estelle Clark Harris on October 11, 1915, the occasion of the unveiling of the Bronze Tablet in honor of Jane Cadwell, Olivet Presbyterian Church, Atlantic City, New Jersey, Alumnae files, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York.

[38]Obituary, Jane Worrall Criswell Cadwell, *Atlantic City Daily Press*, July 4, 1914. Atlantic City Free Public Library, Atlantic City, New Jersey.

[39]Harris, n.p.n.

[40]Ibid.

Although she felt somewhat stifled and confused as a child, Mary Lee's ancestry and social connections provided unique opportunities in which she delighted. Her father's great-grandmother was related to John Quincy Adams, and her mother's grandmother, Agnes Herron, was a cousin of Nellie Herron who married William Howard Taft.[41] These connections afforded periodic invitations to White House functions, and in March 1909 Mary Lee had the opportunity to "pour" at Mrs. Taft's first tea.[42] Another family connection provided Mary Lee first-hand knowledge of Alaska. S. Hall Young, the veteran Alaskan Presbyterian missionary and adventurer, repeatedly traveled to the east coast to solicit financial support for his Wrangell mission work. A friend of Rev. Cadwell, Young visited the Cadwell home on several occasions, and Mary Lee later remembered herself as a "leggy silent child, sitting in [her] father's study and listening star-eyed to Dr. Young describing the wonders of Alaska and that trip with Muir."[43] Mary Lee was enthralled by Young's re-creation of his famous trip with naturalist John Muir to explore Glacier Bay, and she recorded that Young "was the first Alaskan I had ever seen, and all he told made pictures," images that later became reality.[44] During the time she lived in Alaska, Mary Lee was honored to have Dr. Young visit her and her husband in their Fairbanks home for an evening of quiet reflection and chess games.

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[41]International Genealogical Index, 1994 Edition, Family History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

[42]"Notable Resident Dies, Hospitalized 5 Years," *Inquirer and Mirror*, Nantucket, Massachusetts, January 27, 1966, Nantucket Historical Society, Nantucket, Massachusetts.

[43]*Uncle Sam's Attic*, 23.

[44]Ibid.

After graduation from Lincoln High School in Westfield, New Jersey, Mary Lee entered Wellesley College in 1902, the expenses paid by wealthy friends of her parents.[45] There Mary Lee found an environment that nurtured her love for philosophical discussions and reading, and instead of reproach for story telling, the Scribbler's Club encouraged it. Samples of her prose and poetry regularly appeared in *The Wellesley Magazine*, the school's literary journal. Mary Lee excelled academically, and in her junior and senior years she received highest honors as a Durant Scholar, was elected Phi Beta Kappa and graduated with a B. A. degree in the spring of 1906.[46] That fall Mary Lee entered Radcliffe College and earned a masters the following year. With such a remarkable academic career it would appear that Mary Lee found college to her liking. However, her 1928 alumnae information form indicated that she would "probably not" choose Radcliffe for her graduate work if she had it to do over again, and as if to emphasize her displeasure, she further noted that her brother Paul's choice of Harvard Law School had "no connection" to her selection of Radcliffe.[47] Her academic file gives no official explanation for this remark. However her comment on the alumnae information form that "nagging policy of the then college authorities" made her year "*most* uncomfortable" gives a clue to her resentment.[48] Mary Lee's irritation that her major professor would not return

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[45]Newton Woodworth Cadwell, Autobiographical sketch, May 29, 1916, Alumnae files, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York.

[46]Alumnae files, Archives, Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

[47]"Radcliffe Alumnae Information, 1928," Archives, The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[48]Ibid.

her thesis may also have left Mary Lee embittered.[49] A fuller explanation may lie in her answer to a question asking what she considered to be the value of her graduate work:

> As a woman who has lived for years on the frontier in mining camps & isolated towns, I consider a mind equipped with conveniences for doing its own thinking as a *sine quo un.* But I have observed that a college education does not invariably produce such a condition & that it can be arrived at, equally well, by other routes.[50]

The same benefactor who paid for Mary Lee's education provided her a year in Europe after graduation.[51] This opportunity should have created experiences and observations worth saving in story form However, the only mention of this trip in her published work appeared somewhat disguised in an article about a later trip to Colorado.[52] A family friend recalled that Mary Lee cut short the European adventure to return home in 1908 to marry John Allen Davis of Sioux City, Iowa,[53] a 1907 graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology.[54] After their October 29 marriage,[55] the Davises established their

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[49]Meta Bloom Buttnick to author, April 26, 1996.

[50]"1928 Radcliffe Alumnae Information," Archives, The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[51]Newton Woodworth Cadwell, Autobiographical sketch, May 29, 1916, Alumnae Files, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York.

[52]Mary Lee Cadwell Davis, "On The Ute Trail," *The Wellesley Magazine* (June 1910), 378.

[53]Meta Bloom Buttnick to author, January 16, 1996.

[54]Elizabeth Andrews to author, February 29, 1996, Institute Archives and Special Collections, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, Massachusetts.

[55]Cadwell Family Genealogy, Joyce Cadwell Lewis to author, May 7, 1996.

home in Washington, D. C., where Allen, as he was known, worked as a Junior Geologist with the United States Geological Survey.[56]

In the spring of 1909 Mary Lee and her "Seven-eighths," as she affectionately referred to Allen, made a trip to the American west. Like her father who desired a hard job on the untamed frontier, Mary Lee was captivated by the thought of doing things for the first time in an unpopulated land far from the bustle of the city. The Davises rode the Overland Limited on the Union Pacific Railroad into Wyoming, where they picked up some scientific equipment that Allen was to take into Colorado. Near the old Fort Bridger Military Reservation they met up with a Mr. Miller, who provided them with horses and acted as their guide for the four day trip. Although Mary Lee had horseback riding experience from her childhood, choosing which wild stallion would carry her into Colorado was a frightening experience.[57] Knowing she had no choice, she selected "a wiry, wee Indian pony... as the least of many evils."[58] When Mr. Miller instructed not to pull on the bit but turn him by the neck Mary Lee realized that riding a western pony was more like her experience riding a camel in the Sahara Desert, a comparison that puzzled Miller.

For several days the party wound its way along a well-defined trail southeastward through Wyoming, the very northeast corner of Utah and down the Green River into the valley of the Yampa. Craig, Colorado, their final destination, was the quaint small town that Mary Lee imagined, and as the only metropolis for miles around its post office, general store and drug store drew scattered frontiersmen. Mary Lee felt at home

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[56]Elizabeth Andrews to author, February 29, 1996.

[57]Meta Bloom Buttnick to author, January 16, 1996.

[58]Mary Lee Davis, "On The Ute Trail," *The Wellesley Magazine* (June 1910), 377.

immediately and pensively questioned, "do you suppose it is some far-felt touch of our inheritance of pilgrim and pioneer that calls to us from this new West? Why is it, on this unbroken soil, that we are never homesick to hearken back to the harlot cities of the East?"[59] Although Mary Lee found her summer at the Colorado radium mine "living in a tent there on a mountain top" exciting, her western experiences do not figure significantly in her writing.[60] Perhaps they paled by comparison to her years in Alaska.

Mary Lee's frontier adventure continued when after several years in Denver as a Mining Engineer with the U. S. Bureau of Mines[61] Allen received an assignment to create a mine experiment station for the Federal Bureau of Mines in Fairbanks.[62] Wearing a large brimmed hat that had become her trademark, Mary Lee, Allen and their purebred Airedale, Monte, arrived in Alaska's interior on July 15, 1917.[63] In the mid-summer's never-ending daylight, Mary Lee had the opportunity to study the surroundings as the steamer *Alaska* pushed its way up the Yukon River, and her first impressions of Fairbanks were of golden fields of ripening wheat and poles along the city streets. Although she felt enlightened about what to expect in Alaska she realized immediately she had to rethink her subconscious stereotypes. No, the land was not snow covered year round, and the government agricultural station suggested an up and coming industry. And those poles

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[59]Ibid., 390.

[60]*Uncle Sam's Attic*, 104.

[61]Elizabeth Andrews to author, February 29, 1996.

[62]Sumner S. Smith, *The Mining Industry in the Territory of Alaska During the Calendar Year 1916, Department of the Interior*, Bulletin 153, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 8.

[63]"Davis Here To Open Station." *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, July 16, 1917.

were not totems; they supported wires that took electricity into almost every home and carried telephone messages around town and out to the mining camps on the creeks.

Rental property was scarce, but Mary Lee and Allen found a rambling six-room cabin next to St. Matthew's Episcopal Church on Front Street facing the river for which they paid forty dollars a month rent.[64] After arranging their New England antique furniture that had traveled with them to Colorado before finding its way north, Mary Lee got acquainted with the features of her new home. A large wood burning furnace in the basement sent heat up through vents in the floor, and the double paned windows helped to keep the warmth inside. A well sunk under the furnace so that it would never freeze was equipped with an electric pump that pushed water into a holding tank in the attic that provided running water from spigots by gravity. The cabin boasted a large well-equipped kitchen and one of only six modern bathrooms in Fairbanks. On cold winter days Mary Lee enjoyed inviting friends who otherwise would have to go to one of the public bath houses to luxuriate in the large porcelain tub. After the bath she offered a nice cup of coffee and a convivial visit that enhanced the total experience.[65]

Two months after her arrival, Mary Lee learned about Margaret Keenan's Women's Edition of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* and agreed to contribute an article. Most of the features included in this special edition of the newspaper, designed to raise funds to support a bed at the American Hospital in France, covered topics related to how women could help the war effort, young men at war and the reasons why America was at war. Mary Lee, however, spun a sophisticated twist to a scientific article about how Alaska could help the United States *win* the war. She proclaimed that the soldiers needed

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[64]*Uncle Sam's Attic,* 348.

[65]Ibid., 103-4.

more than clothes and food—they needed hardware and equipment made from metals. Therefore, she concluded, "mining is an essential industry for the winning of the war," and she reasoned that the country needed to increase its supply of primary resources such as "natural gas and oil, coal, iron and metalliferous ores."[66] Alaska, she claimed, was the logical location for this extraction, and thus began more than a decade of writing about the northland in an effort to educate Americans about Alaska's wealth and potential.

Mary Lee's books and articles, most of which were published after her departure from Alaska, reveal that she unquestioningly accepted the popular notion at the time that the federal government had grossly neglected Alaska's needs, and her opinions about natural resource development parroted reports by Alfred H. Brooks, USGS geologist for Alaska, and Sumner S. Smith, United States Mine Inspector. Like the professionals, Mary Lee wanted to see the locked up coal fields opened for private leases, construction of the railroad between Seward and Fairbanks, oil exploration and agricultural development. She also agreed with the far-sighted Secretary of the Interior, Walter Lowrie Fisher, who predicted that Alaska's scenic beauty would become "one of its greatest financial assets."[67] Promotion of Alaska became Mary Lee's preoccupation, and she lived her life to experience the greater landscape, to touch her neighbors and develop close friendships, and to participate in community affairs, all in an effort to better understand and appreciate her new home.

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[66]Mary Lea [*sic*] Davis, "The Man Behind The Pick." Women's Edition, *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, November 29, 1917, MKHC, Box 6.

[67]Walter Lowrie Fisher, Secretary of the Interior, *Address on Alaskan Problems*, Before The American Mining Congress at Chicago, Illinois, October 27, 1911 (Washington, 1911), 4.

Alaska's people fascinated Mary Lee. As a newcomer to the Interior she was struck by their "friendliness and cheer;" feelings that were enhanced over time.[68] She was in awe of the sourdough who had self-reliantly "sought the unblazed trails behind the grim dark hills," and the founders of Fairbanks who "had already sowed their untamed youthful oats in untamed youthful camps" and were ready to put down roots and create a permanent community.[69] Mary Lee listened carefully when a woman told her that "Every one has come to find something, or to forget something," and she respected the fact that a community of independent thinking non-conformists is never dull.[70] Whatever their reasons for choosing to live in Alaska the population was a group of similar minded people who, Mary Lee believed, without realizing it were making history, and she was intent to record the progression of events and emotions.

In particular, Mary Lee was interested in the other women who had chosen to make Alaska their home, and she was proud to join forces with this group who were "doing a part in making over all that old Alaska that once was."[71] But most of all, Mary Lee believed that "we women need that vision of ourselves as vital agents in this world of great events."[72] Although she encouraged progress she emphatically warned that being different was not inherently wrong and careful thought must be part of judgment about others. Her book *We Are Alaskans* profiles some of the people whom Mary Lee believed were helping to re-shape the image of Alaska without abandoning their individuality and

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[68]*Uncle Sam's Attic*, 86.

[69]Ibid., 70 and 91.

[70]Ibid., 300.

[71]Mary Lee Davis, *We Are Alaskans* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1931), 119.

[72]*Uncle Sam's Attic*, 334.

cultural roots. Featured are Fannie Quigley, the self-sufficient miner of the Kantishna region; Tillie Paul, the Tlingit Presbyterian missionary from Southeastern Alaska; Janet Aitken, the dog mushing prospector at Arvada; S. Hall Young, the exploring Presbyterian minister and her life-long friend, and W. F. Thompson, the bold and forthright editor of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* who had a reputation for expressing his daring opinions "with no round-about or weasel words."[73] Misconceptions about the north and what kinds of people chose to make it home and why were connecting themes threaded throughout her writing.

Mary Lee attributed distance from Alaska as the primary reason for misunderstanding, and she readily chastised easterners who "get positively irritated when we write to you of flowers and gardens. You want to hear of igloos and mukluks and Polar bears....You want to hear about the cold, always....You want to hear of dissimilars."[74] She responded to such demands by elaborating on how much mineral wealth had been shipped from Alaska since the turn-of-the-century, the summer's light and warmth, and the cultural and technological similarities with the Outside. Although she urged people not to come seeking their fortune in gold, she did offer a litany of reasons for seeking a northern adventure:

> A thirst for the far-away, the old human land-hunger, the desire to be masterless, the wish to escape the crowding economic complex, a will set against regimentation, sheer and clear daredevilty, a youthful love of new experience and adventure...and more....[75]

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[73]Ibid., 143.

[74]Mary Lee Davis, "God's Pocket," *Scribner's Magazine* (June 1924), 660.

[75]Mary Lee Davis, "Who Lives in Alaska—And Why?" *Scribner's Magazine* (May 1929), 576.

Her advice to queries from women considering a move north was succinct. "No woman should come to Alaska who has a narrow-gauge or single-track mind. It is a broad country, in more than one meaning."[76] She also cautioned that "pioneer women are all workers, and the woman who works is independent— it is the woman who has forgotten how to work who has lost her freedom."[77] In general, however, Mary Lee extended a welcome invitation to "cast in your lot and covenant with this new colony of your race overseas, claim here your ten square miles of masterless space, and learn for yourself far the best answer to that question, 'Who lives in Alaska--and why?' "[78]

Mary Lee identified a corollary between the treatment of New England colonials and Alaska pioneers, and her ambition to tell what she perceived to be a story of unfair treatment and government neglect in the territory to influence Washington, D. C., in its policymaking set her pen in motion. Writing primarily for an eastern audience, she ignored any connection between the American western frontier and Alaskan pioneering. Instead she developed a theme of similarity between the misunderstandings that New Englanders first suffered. The colonials, she professed, were cast as religious fanatics, convicts on the run, and general misfits fearfully huddled together in a savage Indian-infested land, while Alaskans were portrayed as derelicts hiding out in this distant frozen country over-run by Eskimos, a parallel that she believed blue-blood easterners could better understand. Her assessment of life on the new frontier was that Alaskans were "just other latter-day New Englanders, doing a similar hard pioneering job with much the same

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[76]Ibid., 577.

[77]*We Are Alaskans*, 119.

[78]Ibid.

faith in themselves and for their chosen land."[79] Clearly Mary Lee's experiences provided the raw material for her later writing, and after her arrival in Fairbanks she wasted no time in getting involved in the activities that were shaping the territory.

Although raised in the Presbyterian religion, Mary Lee joined St. Matthew's Episcopal Church because of Allen's faith, and her friend Jessie Bloom remembered that Mary Lee commented on "her Presbyterian knees which she found so difficult to bend at the proper time."[80] The Episcopalians founded St. Matthew's Church and Hospital in 1904, and opened the first library in Fairbanks.[81] In addition to a seat on the board of directors, Mary Lee was a member of the church Women's Guild that operated the library's public reading room, opened in 1906 to provide books, magazines and newspapers to local residents, the outlying mining camps and the jail.[82] In their history of St. Mathew's Church, Arnold Griese and Ed Bigelow recorded, "there was little a miner in Fairbanks could do on long dark winter nights if he did not drink or did not frequent saloons. Worst of all there was little reading matter in the new gold camp."[83] Appeals to church members outside resulted in a flood of periodicals, all sorted by volunteers in the church rectory. When donations outgrew available space the work was moved to the Pioneer Hotel, where the proprietor asked only that the hotel lobby be well supplied with magazines in exchange for the accommodations. By 1908 over twenty-five thousand pieces of reading material were received annually, and in 1909 George C. Thomas,

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[79]Ibid., 5.

[80]Jessie Bloom, "1974 Memoir," AJAC (see chap. 1, n. 55), 89.

[81]Arnold Griese and Ed Bigelow, *O Ye Frost and Cold: The History of St. Matthew's Church, Fairbanks, Alaska* (Fairbanks: St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, 1980), 7.

[82]*The Alaskan Churchman* (November 1906), 5.

[83] Griese and Bigelow, 22.

secretary of the Episcopal Mission Board, donated the money to build a library that would replace the reading room. Bishop Hudson Stuck's donation of one thousand books augmented the growing supply of periodicals and filled the George C. Thomas Memorial Library when it was dedicated August 5, 1909, shortly after the death of its benefactor.[84]

Mary Lee's affiliation with the Episcopalians also provided a literary outlet. The Fairbanks diocese published a quarterly magazine designed to keep church members Outside informed about the Alaska mission. This forum provided Mary Lee an opportunity to share her progressive philosophy about the territory, and the February 1919 edition carried her article expounding Alaska's wealth and contributions to the United States in hopes of convincing readers that development of the north's natural resources "would enable Alaska, the stepchild of the nation, to...do what the opening of the West did after our Civil War—pay the Nation's War Debt!"[85]

Mary Lee's regular donation of periodicals to the reading room helped supply the Fairbanks community with reading material. An avid art and music enthusiast she subscribed to forty-seven journals on the subjects.[86] After reading each issue she cut out articles of particular interest and added them to scrapbooks that she had maintained since childhood. In her effort to share the cultural arts with Fairbanksans she frequently gave talks to groups using these scrapbooks as the basis for her lectures, and she generously shared her collections with individuals who expressed interest in learning more.[87] When

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[84]Ibid., 22-26.

[85]Mary Lee Davis. "Uncle Sam and the Treasure of the Humble." *The Alaskan Churchman* (February 1919), 46-7.

[86]*Uncle Sam's Attic*, 331.

[87]Jessie Bloom. "1974 Memoir," 86.

she had finished with her magazines she donated them to the library's reading room. Her friend Meta Bloom Buttnick remembers, however, that this act of kindness could turn to frustration for subsequent readers. On one occasion a gentleman had gotten interested in a particular article only to find the page on which it continued cut out and undoubtedly pasted into Mary Lee's scrapbook. His anger got the better of him, and he "threw the magazine across the room."[88]

Previous experience as an Associated Press reporter put Mary Lee in a position to accept the job of handling the local Red Cross chapter's publicity, and periodic articles written for the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* fostered a professional relationship with W. F. Thompson, the newspaper's editor.[89] A contribution printed in September 1918 provided knitting instructions for socks and sweaters to clothe American servicemen in France, and another article that fall called the women of Fairbanks together to sew two hundred fifty garments for French refugees.[90] The invitation to gather at the library the following Wednesday and Saturday for sewing marathons was followed by emphatic instructions to every woman to organize her schedule with these dates in mind. Mary Lee's rhetorical plea that "you will do this, won't you, oh you patriotic women of Fairbanks?" left no question in anyone's mind about participating.[91] During World War I Red Cross autograph quilts were popular fund-raisers. Designed with a central red cross surrounded by a checker board of red and white squares, people were asked to sign blocks

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[88]Meta Bloom Buttnick to author, January 16, 1996.

[89]*We Are Alaskans*, 149.

[90]*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, "Tanana Valley Chapter, The American Red Cross, Knitting Instructions," September 14, 1918; "Who Will Sew For Refugees?" October 30, 1918.

[91]Ibid, October 30, 1918.

for which they donated a small sum of money. The finished quilts were usually raffled; and the money generated, given to the Red Cross.[92] Although knitting and sewing clothing for the war effort were regular Fairbanks contributions, there is no mention that the popular and easily constructed autograph quilts caught anyone's attention.

Although she considered Thompson more of a colleague than a true friend, Mary Lee liked him and respected his candid approach to journalism.[93] The Fairbanks flu epidemic in the spring of 1920, however, caused some tension between the two. Thompson had a "survival of the fittest" attitude and showed little empathy for the weak. Believing as he did that Fairbanks was a land for a strong chosen few, he could not accept the seriousness of this epidemic, which had hundreds of residents hospitalized or sick in their own beds. After all, there was no place for weakness in "Our Town," as he referred nightly to Fairbanks in his column about the goings-on in the community. "These rotten and annoying rumors" that the flu has invaded Fairbanks do not "contribute anything of moment to the camp's progress," Thompson stated in early April in a short article tucked on a back page entitled, "Is No Flu In Our Town."[94] By the twenty-sixth of the month, however, he admitted to the seriousness of the disease in his headline, "OUR TOWN HAS THE FLU, OR SOMETHING WORSE."[95] Thompson admitted that "Fairbanks has the flu, and it is growing day by day," and his Editorial for the day was devoted to home treatment procedures.[96] The crises peaked a couple of days later, and by April 28 the

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[92]Carter Houck, "Museum Quilts: The Memorial Hall Museum in Old Deerfield," *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* (June 1996), 33.

[93]*We Are Alaskans*, 157.

[94]*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, April 8, 1920.

[95]Ibid., April 26, 1920.

[96]Ibid.

News-Miner proudly announced, "EVERYTHING IS ALL RIGHT: FAIRBANKS TOO HEALTHY FOR IT."

Mary Lee wrote a story that was published in the August 1929 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* and later became a chapter in her book *We Are Alaskans* that described the flu epidemic and her role as a volunteer night duty nurse in the make-shift hospital in the basement of St. Joseph's Catholic Church. She did not hesitate to report that hundreds of individuals were deliriously ill, the hospital over-flowing and trained medical personnel insufficient to meet the demand. Hence Red Cross volunteers provided what care they could. In her report, Mary Lee explained how one doctor pronounced a patient dead only to find him revived, having suffered an asthma attack. This incident and the doctor's eventual permanent departure from Fairbanks on the first boat out that summer were never mentioned by Thompson, the journalist who could only report the best about Fairbanks.[97] In fact, Mary Lee later learned that in Thompson's effort to keep the entire epidemic a secret from the rest of world he never mailed copies of the "flu-time papers" to out of town subscribers.[98] Break-up came and with the out-going winter's rotted ice went the disease that had disabled Fairbanks. By late June the seriousness of the episode was only a memory, recollection of which was restored vaguely by a *News-Miner* advertisement announcing a Fourth of July "Patriotic Ball" at which "tickets for the May Day dance which was canceled because of the flu will be honored."[99]

In addition to telling of community activities, Mary Lee derived great pleasure in describing the houses in which she lived, not as a brag but as a convincing reprimand that

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[97]*We Are Alaskans*. 285 - 311.

[98]Ibid., 144-5.

[99]*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, June 28, 1920.

people outside needed to know of Fairbanks luxury. After renting a log cabin for two years the Davises had the opportunity to buy a house on Cowles Street at the corner of Fifth Avenue. This large eight-room home boasted a lawn with planted birch trees, an open fire-place, hot-water heat, polished oak floors, trim and doors, a vacuum system, cellar ash-chute, large screened porch, double garage, and superior insulation. In fact it was a house within a house with the six-inch space between the two walls filled with sawdust to retain the warmth in winter and repel the heat of the summer.[100] After several winters in the house, Mary Lee remarked to a friend that her father used twenty-five tons of coal to heat his similar sized house in Atlantic City, while she and Allen used nine.[101] Filled with family heirlooms, the Davis house was considered one of the most elegant homes in town. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.[102]

Travels around the territory also provided subject matter for Mary Lee's writing. In 1916 United States Mine Inspector, Sumner S. Smith, announced the establishment of a Fairbanks mining experimental station to assist prospectors determine the value and quantity of minerals, which in turn was expected to help individuals decide whether or not to launch full scale mining operations.[103] As chief mining engineer for this station, Allen was required to travel the territory to make assessments, and an adventurous Mary Lee frequently accompanied him. The summers of 1918 and 1924 were spent canvassing the

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[100]Janet Matheson, *Fairbanks: A City Historic Building Survey* (City of Fairbanks, 1978), n.p.n.

[101]*Uncle Sam's Attic*, 308-10.

[102]National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, Fairbanks North Star Borough, Fairbanks, Alaska.

[103]Sumner S. Smith, *The Mining Industry in the Territory of Alaska During the Calendar Year 1916* (Washington, D. D.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 8.

Seward Peninsula,[104] and one August, almost too late in the season for such an adventure, she and Allen journeyed six days by dog-sled and pack-horse into the Kantishna Region. They traveled the route that is now the Denali Park road into Wonder Lake and up Moose Creek to Joe and Fannie Quigley's homestead. For eleven days Joe and Allen scouted the region for mineral prospects while the women tramped the hills and Mary Lee revelled in hearing Fannie's life story. Even though Fannie praised her for being the first woman to come into this country through the "new passes,"[105] Mary Lee considered the time with Fannie "one of the rarest treats [she had] ever known and worth a dozen pioneering high-pass trails."[106] But her adventures continued, and like many Alaskans who wanted one last look at the wilderness before the railroad "messed it up," Mary Lee and Allen walked the Broad Pass section of the trackless rail bed half way between Anchorage and Fairbanks.[107] An unexpected spring blizzard hit with a vengeance, and they were "caught crawling along like flies upon the mountain slope."[108] It took them nearly two weeks to traverse the one hundred miles. Mary Lee recorded that friends in Fairbanks became so worried when they did not arrive home on time that W. F. Thompson wrote what amounted to an obituary for the couple whom he declared were lost on their crazy foolhardy adventure.[109] Not long after, Mary Lee crossed this country in a Pullman observation coach. As the train crossed Broad Pass Mary Lee:

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[104]*Uncle Sam's Attic*, 147.

[105]*We Are Alaskans*, 182.

[106]Ibid., 198.

[107]*Uncle Sam's Attic*, 202.

[108]Ibid.

[109]Ibid., 202-3.

> looked far down [and] recognized from this now conquered height that very chasm of our three-fold avalanche, where we had struggled for three days imprisoned in the mountain's heart, walled with impenetrable snows, against archaic night. This was the conquest men had dreamed, this was the bourned of all those lonely trails. . . . Again mere Man had answered the insuperable challenge, with his dream-spun steel.[110]

In the 1920s descriptives, travel books and articles about Alaska were plentiful. According to the *Boston Herald*, too many of these "have been written on second hand information or as a result of a hasty summer visit."[111] When Mary Lee began to publish her works about Alaska she gained immediate credibility because she had actually lived in the territory, seen the landscape she described, and knew the people about whom she wrote. In an effort to present Alaska in an appealing way to the general public, writers like Frank G. Carpenter, who created a series of over twenty books sharing his knowledge of as many countries and their people based on his globe trotting observations, sublimated cultural differences and romanticized nature. When Carpenter wrote that he could provide his readers "a close view of Mount McKinley only from hearsay and from the magnificent pictures of Belmore Browne, the noted mountain climber of the Camp Fire Club of America,"[112] Mary Lee countered with a personal and insightful introduction to a chapter about this majestic mountain and its surrounding country that she explored on foot with her husband. To emphasize her first-hand experience, she bragged that, "ever since we

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[110]Ibid., 203-4.

[111]"Who Are The Alaskans?," *Boston Herald*, July 25, 1931, Joyce Cadwell Lewis Personal Collection.

[112]Frank G. Carpenter, *Alaska Our Northern Wonderland* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923), 282.

first came to Alaska I had been looking out from my south window. . .over toward that great mountain hung upon the clouds—Denali, Last-Home-of-the-Sun."[113] When Carpenter attempted to ease his reader's fear of wildlife by stating that "Alaskan bears, caught as cubs, make wonderfully tame pets"[114] Mary Lee described her "most intimate—and, I'll confess, a much too intimate!—contact with grizzlies"[115] in a five page description of following and being followed by a sow with two cubs on a trek into the Kantishna country. She concluded her account by honestly informing her readers that she did not "recall this episode with any great pride, for I was scared and there's no use denying it. But—my only regret is, I *do* wish I knew just how big that grizzly was!"[116]

Her knowledge of and friendships with Alaska Natives placed Mary Lee's work far above the travel writers. Her friendship with Muk-pi, a Nome Eskimo woman who died in the 1918 Seward Peninsula diphtheria epidemic, convinced Mary Lee that Alaska Natives "are human beings, not mere quaint curiosities."[117] Although she was very familiar with the outside efforts to reshape the lives of these original inhabitants of the northland, she convincingly recorded that it was a great mistake to feel sorry for them and an even greater one "if we try to change their ways too much toward our ways."[118] While the popular literature presented reassuring assessments that the Natives had become Americanized in their dress, religion, types of houses and even their use of United States

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[113]*We Are Alaskans*, 181.

[114]Carpenter, photo caption facing 100.

[115]*We Are Alaskans*, 185.

[116]Ibid., 188.

[117]*Uncle Sam's Attic*, 159.

[118]Ibid., 161.

currency, Mary Lee repeatedly stressed the importance of learning about and understanding their values and customs, and warned against assuming an attitude of cultural arrogance. Understanding the Inuit philosophy that "theirs is a superabundant measure of that rare gift of the gods—free, constant, bubbling laughter that neither fear nor night nor winter stillness when the Sea is closed, can still in them," eased Mary Lee's pain when her friend, Muk'pi, died in the summer of 1918.[119]

By September 1924 the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines was sufficiently developed to assume responsibility for the work previously conducted by the mining experimental station, and Allen Davis was reassigned to Washington, D. C.[120] When the Davises left Alaska in October 1924, Mary Lee took with her notebooks full of rich memories.[121] Back on the east coast she created four books in quick succession that recounted her experiences and observations about her seven years in the north.

All of Mary Lee's books about Alaska were published by the W. A. Wilde Company of Boston, whose marketing strategies resulted in enormous success. Her first book, *Uncle Sam's Attic*, appeared in 1930 followed closely by *Alaska, The Great Bear's Cub*, a children's book that came out later the same year. Of the former, Dan Sutherland, Alaska's Delegate to Congress, remarked, "Mrs. Davis has produced a master piece,"[122] and enthusiastic book critic, William Lyon Phelps, "placed it third on his list of best books

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[119]*We Are Alaskans*, 59.

[120]"Far North College," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, September 13, 1924.

[121] Ibid., "Davis' Leave For Outside," October 17, 1924.

[122]Dan Sutherland to W. A. Wilde Publishing Co., May 5, 1930. Archives. Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

of 1930."[123] The book was later published in Braille by the Library of Congress.[124] The recognition and acclaim given *Uncle Sam's Attic* by east coast reviewers was not necessarily shared by Alaskans, however. In his October 1930 editorial in *The Alaskan Churchman*, Rev. Michael J. Keppenbrock praised Mary Lee for her "delightful insight into the history and present status of the Last Frontier," but he criticized her nearsighted analysis that Fairbanks represented the whole of Alaska:

> The viewpoint is that of one who has lived in Fairbanks, and it is the Interior that is suggested to be the true Alaska. We feel that it is hardly fair for those who have crossed the high mountain ranges and descended into valleys of the Yukon and the Tanana to claim a superiority over those Alaskans who have pioneered other sections of this great empire-to-be.[125]

Thirty years later Melvin B. Ricks, author of *A Basic Bibliography of Alaskan Literature*, remarked that Mary Lee's writing style "may be buoyant and fanciful in one chapter and painfully detailed, slow-moving, and repetitious in the next."[126] Ricks further remarked on the inaccuracy of many of her statistical and historical facts that she apparently did not check, and he questioned that living in Alaska for seven years qualified anyone as an " 'old, old resident' " as Mary Lee claimed for credibility.[127] Nevertheless, *Uncle Sam's Attic* made a significant impact.

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[123]Ibid., Allan H. Wilde to Eunice Lathrope, October 8, 1930.

[124]Ibid., Biographical sketch of Mary Lee Davis.

[125]Michael J. Kippenbrock, Editor and Business Manager, *The Alaskan Churchman* (October 1930), 119.

[126]Melvin B. Ricks, *A Basic Bibliography of Alaskan Literature, Annotated* (Juneau: 1960), Alaska State Library, Alaska Historical Collections, Juneau, Alaska, 101.

[127]Ibid.

When *Alaska, The Great Bear's Cub* appeared in print a few months later, it filled the void for credible Alaskan literature for young people. Replete with pen and ink drawings by Alaska naturalist Olaus Murie, this charming volume informed its readers how glaciers are born, why the author of *The Night Before Christmas* should have taken another look at reindeer hoofs, how totem poles are made and what they represent, how the Russians discovered Alaska and more.[128] By 1931 these two books had brought Mary Lee enough attention that she was a frequent lecturer about Alaska in the Washington, D. C., area. Her talk chronicled what she described "as a colony of adventuring Anglo-Saxons," and her notoriety brought in more than 700 letters from interested readers.[129] Some of the writers suggested that Mary Lee write a third book about her Alaska experiences that contained sketches of individuals without a focus on Alaska's potential economic value to the United States. She took heed, and in 1931 the W. A. Wilde Company published *We Are Alaskans* that was described as " gossipy, warm, intimate tales" about the Natives and the Anglos who call Alaska home.[130] A Washington, D. C., newspaper called it "a book of people, of customs embodied in sturdy characters,"[131] and the *Boston Herald* praised Mary Lee's effort by agreeing with her that "[y]es, indeed, people are more interesting than places."[132]

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[128]Promotional brochure for *Alaska, The Great Bear's Cub*, Archives, Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

[129]Unidentified newspaper clipping, *The Boston Herald*, March 21, 1931, and "Alumnae Update Iinformation, 1931", Archives, Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

[130]Ricks, 102.

[131]"New Books at Random," *The Evening Star*, Washington, D. C., August 11, 1931, Joyce Cadwell Lewis Personal Collection.

[132]"Who Are The Alaskans?," *Boston Herald*, July 20, 1931, Joyce Cadwell Lewis Personal Collection.

Mary Lee's fourth, and least well known, volume about the north is a novel set in the Klondike gold rush era, depicting one man's attempt meditatively to get in touch with himself as he floated the Yukon River. The promotional literature that accompanied this 1933 publication suggested that *Sourdough Gold, The Log of a Yukon Adventure* "is a man's story, the fruit of that high courage which finds its deepest tap-root in the secret, silent place."[133] The publisher suggested that the theme portrayed "a frankness and an insight won from a long abiding within the hidden North." However, the story itself made it clear that the "sourdough" hero spent only one year in the Klondike.[134] If Mary Lee was accused of exaggerating her seven year stay in Fairbanks into long residence, the Yukon River float hero hardly qualified as a sourdough. Nevertheless, for want of first hand material about Alaska, *Sourdough Gold* received minor attention.

As Mary Lee wrote her books, many of the chapters appeared individually in such leading literary magazines as *Scribner's* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. In 1929 two interviews with women who currently resided in the White House appeared in *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* magazines, but her 1933 book publication marked the end of her professional writing career.[135]

The Davises continued to live in Washington, D. C., where Allen ultimately held the position of chief engineer for the information division of the Bureau of Mines.[136] While visiting her Alaska friends in the mid-1930s, Meta Bloom Buttnick read portions of

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[133]Promotional brochure, *Sourdough Gold, The Log of a Yukon Adventure*, Archives, Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

[134]Ibid.

[135]"Vice-President's Lady." *Good Housekeeping* (March 1929) and "Precedence and Precedents," *Ladies Home Journal* (August, 1929)

[136]Obituary for John Allen Davis from unidentified newspaper, August 31, 1962, The Nantucket Atheneum, Nantucket, Massachusetts.

an autobiography that Mary Lee had drafted and hoped to publish. However, there is no record of this accomplishment, nor can the manuscript be located.[137] When her father died in 1936 Mary Lee became custodian of his personal recollections written in short story form.[138] Rev. Cadwell had frequently talked about publishing these "little adventures. . . as an ideal of physical & moral courage to young men," and there was discussion about Mary Lee taking on the task.[139] By 1950 this had not happened and Paul, Mary Lee's brother, suggested that Hamilton College, his father's *alma mater*, might be interested in pursuing the idea. Clearly the job was a challenge beyond Mary Lee's physical capabilities.

In the late 1930s, at the age of fifty-eight, Mary Lee was struck by lightening, which left her visually impaired. In a letter to the *Wellesley Alumnae Magazine* in 1949 she wrote: "for over ten years I have been forced to conserve very carefully all close eye work, not to strain unduly the remaining good eye. So great Zeus himself wrote finis to my writing, in no uncertain terms. Even letters get short shrift."[140] Several years later, Allen's health deteriorated from the strain of two war-time government jobs, and he was forced to retire. The Davises moved from Washington, D. C., to Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, where they lived in Allen's family home that he had inherited when his mother died in 1930.[141] There, according to Mary Lee, they enjoyed the "gracious 18th

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[137]Meta Bloom Buttnick to author, April 16, 1996 and Joyce Cadwell Lewis to author, May 7, 1996.

[138]Paul N. Cadwell to Registrar, Hamilton College, March 8, 1936, Archives, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York.

[139]Ibid., Paul N. Cadwell to Mr. Love, October 30, 1950.

[140]"1906," *Wellesley Alumnae Magazine*, October 1950, Archives, Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, 44.

[141]Ibid., Alumnae files.

century pace" and led "a very peaceful, almost monastic life."[142] In 1960 poor health and dwindling finances forced the childless couple to give up their home and move into the Nantucket Cottage Hospital, where Allen died on August 30, 1962 .[143] Three and a half years later Mary Lee passed away at the age of eighty-one. The Nantucket newspaper carried a lengthy obituary that heralded Mary Lee's career. As a writer about Alaska her goal had always been to influence the federal government in its decision making about the territory, and her book *Uncle Sam's Attic* was her masterpiece towards this endeavor. Shortly after its publication two prominent industrialists, Robert E. Wood of Sears Roebuck and a Mr. Endicott of Endicott Johnson, recognized the significance of what Mary Lee said. Allegedly they purchased copies of the book that were distributed to each Congressman and Senator in Washington, resulting in a Congressional delegations' visit to Alaska the following summer.[144] Beginning July 13, 1931, the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* prepared the community for the entourage, and once their journey commenced daily notices kept residents apprised of their guests' progress. While traveling north from Anchorage the group took a trip through McKinley Park, and the *News-Miner* reported that even "MT. M'KINLEY [*sic*] SHOWS UP FOR CONGRESSMEN."[145] Clouds hung heavy over the Park, obscuring the magnificent mountain that Mary Lee had hiked around and written about. The *News-Miner* reported, however, that "suddenly the clouds just seemed to lift and float away and there was the mountain in all its marvelous grandeur.

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[142]Ibid., "1906," *Wellesley Alumnae Magazine*, October 1950, 44.

[143]Obituary, John Allen Davis, August 31, 1962, The Nantucket Atheneum, Nantucket, Massachusetts.

[144]Ibid., Obituary, Mary Lee Davis, January 27, 1966.

[145]*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, July 29, 1931.

For over eighteen hours we all had a splendid view of Mt. McKinley, then the curtain dropped."[146] An editorial on July 28 welcomed the dozen or so distinguished visitors and announced a banquet in their honor that evening at the Model Cafe. When the politicians left Fairbanks the morning of July 30, the newspaper proudly editorialized: "THEY CAME HERE AS STRANGERS THEY LEFT AS FRIENDS."[147] In thanking Fairbanksans for their hospitality, the Congressmen pledged that "their friendship would be expressed in measures designed to aid the development of the Territory."[148] All this was a direct result of Mary Lee's first book. The young woman who ate a breakfast of dried figs and oatmeal as she sat on her screened porch reading magazines and planning her day's writing schedule had achieved a reknown that most people would not even dare dream.[149]

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[146]Ibid.

[147]Ibid., July 30, 1931.

[148]Ibid.

[149]Meta Bloom Buttnick to author, January 16, 1996.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Alaska's pioneer women "were beautiful and likewise possessed of every feminine charm as well as ability and pluck. Many not only shared in the great work of developing mines and conquering the frontier—but did the women's part in founding here a land of permanence, rearing families and establishing homes—making Alaska a homeland, which is the first great essential in building an enduring state."[1]

The journalist David Richardson wrote, "one of the fascinations of the gold rush era is that so many unlikely men (not to mention some pretty unlikely women) took part in it."[2] Additionally, there is a commonly held perception that women's lives in early Fairbanks were filled with drudgery and hardship. As we look back at some of these "unlikely women," a theme emerges that makes their presence on the early Alaskan frontier more plausible than improbable, and their lives were far more genteel than assumed. Although they came from varied backgrounds and circumstances, illumination of their lives creates a pattern in which we can see them geographically separated from other women of their time, yet very much within the broad scope of woman's world.

First we see them moving north with little reservation intent on improving their individual circumstances. Ellen Gibson and Margaret Keenan Harrais had previously

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[1]"Pioneer Women of Northland," unidentified newspaper article, Member's Recollections, Pioneer Women of Alaska, CRC (see chap. 1, n. 1).

[2]David Richardson, James Geoghegan Collection finding aid, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

established homes in the west for economic and professional advancement; therefore, their migration north was simply an extension of their beliefs that the frontier held opportunity and prospects for betterment. Although Jessie Bloom came to Alaska as an American immigrant, her buoyant attitude about beginning married life on a foreign frontier suggests an eagerness to do something unique and participate in the making of events. Likewise, Mary Lee Davis, who had spent time in Colorado, found that Fairbanks fed her adventuresome spirit and provided fertile ground that enhanced her professional writing career. Armed with education, experience and, as Margaret Keenan Harrais said, "a few extra drops of pioneering blood," their commitment to succeed in their chosen ventures enabled women to use their minds and hands to first establish homes, and then to create a climate that nurtured individual and community growth.[3]

Most of the women who came to Fairbanks during the early years had left behind comfortable homes in established communities. Historian Sandra Myres has written that on the nineteenth-century American frontier "progress and economic betterment required sacrifice."[4] If Fairbanks women felt this, they did not speak of it in such blatant terms. Like women on the western frontier who believed the "wilderness could be conquered and civilization reestablished," adjustment to new conditions was perceived by Fairbanks women as what made them special and Alaska unique.[5] As such, they recorded with pride how they not only adapted to a harsh climate but thrived in it, and reverting to somewhat primitive conditions provided convivial challenges rather than set-back. For instance, Ellen Gibson turned the lack of housing into a successful business venture for herself by

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[3]Margaret Keenan Harrais, "Alaska Periscope," (see chap. 4, n. 2), 28.

[4]Sandra Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (see chap. 1, n. 75), 14.

[5]Ibid.

building cabins to rent, and Jessie Bloom found using a wood stove for heating and cooking an exciting adventure. Instead of a hardship, women found that ordering food annually reduced the amount of time spent shopping, thus creating openings for other pursuits. Although Mary Lee Davis found life in Alaska more primitive than her east coast upbringing, she capitalized on it by telling correspondents and readers of her published writings that life in the north was cosmopolitan and not significantly different from Outside. Most important, she raised the consciousness of Outsiders about Alaska's wealth and potential.

Months of overland travel from America's east coast to the western frontier allowed women Outside to acquire new skills on the trail. This practical experience was useful to women as they settled into their new homes. Myres noted that "more important, the lessons of flexibility and adaptability learned under the conditions of trail life helped women to cope with new conditions and new problems."[6] Early Fairbanks women did not have the advantage of a journey to prepare them for frontier living, nor was their trip as arduous, but as previously noted, the earliest arrivals like Ellen Gibson were seasoned pioneers from Dawson, and subsequent residents like Margaret Keenan Harrais and Mary Lee Davis had lived in the west prior to moving north. Regardless of their experiences, early Fairbanks women had an eagerness for adventure that allowed them to remain flexible and tolerant and to adapt readily to their new conditions.

Except for the earliest arrivals, Fairbanksans did not have to contend with the construction of houses at journey's end like earlier newcomers on the western frontier who arrived to empty land with only what they could carry. Housekeeping in the rural west

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[6]Ibid., 139.

"required a good deal of ingenuity" compared to Fairbanks.[7] Because cook stoves, wash tubs and wringers and similar household equipment were too big and heavy to carry overland, western women often cooked on open fires and improvised their laundry aids. Many Fairbanks women were able to bring in such household goods with them on the boats, but, if not, because Fairbanks was founded as a supply center for outlying mining operations, many services and merchandise were available to purchase that added comfort and ease to day-to-day chores.

Historians have documented the isolation and resultant loneliness experienced on the rural American frontier.[8] By choosing to live in a community, early Fairbanks women had companionship and organizations with which to affiliate. Women's church, social and civic groups were formed early, and the regularly held community balls and celebrations provided entertainment for most residents. In addition, school related activities captured the interest of many. In Fairbanks, as in the west, teachers and youth leaders were prominent figures in the community.[9] Thus Margaret Keenan Harrais, the superintendent of schools, and Jessie Bloom, who founded a private kindergarten and the Girl Scouts in Fairbanks, both enjoyed community respect.

As in the west, once homes, schools and churches were established, Fairbanks women turned their organizational skills to creating a cultural atmosphere.[10] Music, drama and literary groups developed along with political reform movements. Myres

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[7]Ibid., 146.

[8]Cathy Luchetti and Carol Olwell, *Women Of The West*, The Library of the American West, ed. Herman J. Viola (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1982), 28-9.

[9]Myres, 185.

[10]Ibid., 205.

recorded that "although the women's rights movement started in the East, it was on the frontiers that the first significant gains were made."[11] For women like Jessie Bloom and Margaret Keenan Harrais who had been involved previously with enfranchisement and temperance issues. Fairbanks allowed them to work actively within the structure of woman's suffrage and the WCTU to effect political change simultaneously with women Outside.[12]

Due to national twentieth-century technological advances, quickly Fairbanks established a modern infrastructure that made it commensurate with, if not somewhat better than, that of other communities its size. Telegraphic and telephonic apparatus sped communications within the territory and linked Alaska with the Outside, and the availability of electricity allowed the use of irons and vacuum cleaners that lightened household chores. Rivers for transportation provided more mobility than was experienced in the early American West, and Fairbanks women like Ellen Gibson and Jessie Bloom regularly journeyed Outside for business, medical care and cultural enhancement.

The American frontier and Alaska offered challenges to women's skills and provided opportunity to broaden the scope of their home and community activities, but economic opportunities were not significantly different from those in the East.[13] Women's entry into the business community, like Ellen Gibson's home laundry and rental cabins, provided needed services to a fledgling town, and Fairbanks' isolation from Outside resulted in more cooperation than competition. As on the American frontier, Fairbanks women generally found their niche in endeavors that were typically filled by women, like

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[11]Ibid., 213.

[12]Ibid., 209.

[13]Ibid., 238.

Margaret Keenan Harrais's position as superintendent of schools, and Mary Lee Davis's role as a professional writer.[14] Fairbanks women like Ellen Gibson could borrow money for their business ventures, and many women enjoyed successful careers, but as in the west, the Alaska women were not revolutionary in their choices. None the less, women were proud of their accomplishments. Because men's attitudes generally paralleled those of women, and Fairbanks harbored an egalitarian spirit, women were encouraged and reinforced in their endeavors, and the community welcomed their contributions.

Women who arrived in Fairbanks prior to 1923 were eager participants in the growth and development of a community that was founded by seasoned pioneers. Organized government established an infrastructure that easily accommodated twentieth-century technology, and river transportation provided necessary goods and leisurely travel into Alaska's Interior. Fairbanks became a comfortable place to live more quickly than did the American west, and Alaska attracted women who were eager to reestablish civilization as they had known it elsewhere. Women did not come to Fairbanks to escape from what was going on Outside—they came to create an extension of the Outside in Alaska. They derived personal satisfaction from their efforts and felt intense pride for their contributions that they knew had impact on the development and permanence of Fairbanks.

After learning details of women's lives in early Fairbanks, I have concluded that their day-to-day existence was less complicated than my routine many years later at a rural Alaska cabin. I do not have the advantage of a commercial laundry, water and fire wood delivery, or stores within a short distance from which to make purchases. When I reach my destination, I have what I have packed and transported by river boat or snow machine. If something is forgotten, flexibility and adaptation are the solution. If laundry is done, it

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[14]Ibid.. 185 and 246.

is a heat the water and slosh the clothes in a bucket job, water is pumped from a well by hand and hauled on a sled, and fire wood is located in the forest, cut, hauled to the cabin by boat or snow machine, split and stacked. The advantage that I have, however, is that I am not trying to civilize the wilderness. I go to the cabin to enjoy isolation and solitude for a time and to live a less structured life style. When the need for conveniences and socialization arises, as it ultimately does, I can return rejuvenated to Fairbanks with all of its comforts and fit back into society. But, my idea of life in the wilderness is similar to environmentalist Bill McKibben's view of nature—"a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it."[15] Therefore, my time spent at a cabin in the woods is more a mind set than a way of life.

My experiences in no way diminish the awe I feel for the women who dared to come to the almost unheard of community of Fairbanks in the early 1900s, where they created lives for themselves and influenced the quality of life for other pioneers. Alaska provided the stage on which they successfully acted out their idea of society.

[15]Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1989), 8.

Appendix A

Analysis by Region of Foreign Born
Pioneer Women of Alaska

Total foreign born: (57 individuals) = 32.76%

Region	Countries	Numbers of Individuals	Percentage of Total	Percentage of Foreign Born
Western European	Germany, England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France, Austria, Belgium	30	17	53
Eastern European	Latvia	2	1	4
Scandinavian	Sweden, Norway, Finland	13	7	23
Southern European	Italy	1	Less than 1	Less than 1
Canadian		11	6	19

Appendix B

Analysis by Country of Foreign Born
Pioneer Women of Alaska

Specific Countries Represented

Country	Numbers of Individuals
Germany	13
Canada	11
England, Scotland, Wales	8
Sweden	8
Ireland	4
Norway	4
France	3
Latvia	2
Austria	1
Belgium	1
Finland	1
Italy	1

Appendix C

Analysis by Region of American Born Pioneer Women of Alaska

Total American born: (117 individuals) = 67.24%

Region	State/Territory	Numbers of Individuals	Percentage of Total	Percentage of American Born
New England	Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island	3	1.72	2.56
Mid-Atlantic	New Jersey, West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware	11	6.32	9.40
South	Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Florida	1	Less than 1	Less than 1
Mid-West	Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Illinois	20	11.49	17.09
Plains	North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri	34	19.54	29.06
West	New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon	46	26.44	39.32
	Hawaii and Washington, D. C.	2	1.14	1.70

Appendix D

Analysis by State of American Born Pioneer Women of Alaska

Specific States/Territories Represented

State/Territory	Numbers of Individuals
Washington	16
California	15
Pennsylvania	8
Iowa	7
Michigan	7
Minnesota	7
Nebraska	6
Ohio	5
Illinois	5
Wisconsin	5
Oregon	4
Colorado	4
Missouri	4
Kentucky	3
Kansas	3
South Dakota	2
New York	2
Connecticut	1
Hawaii	1
Tennessee	1
Washington, D. C.	1
West Virginia	1
Massachusetts	1
New Hampshire	1
Nevada	1

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